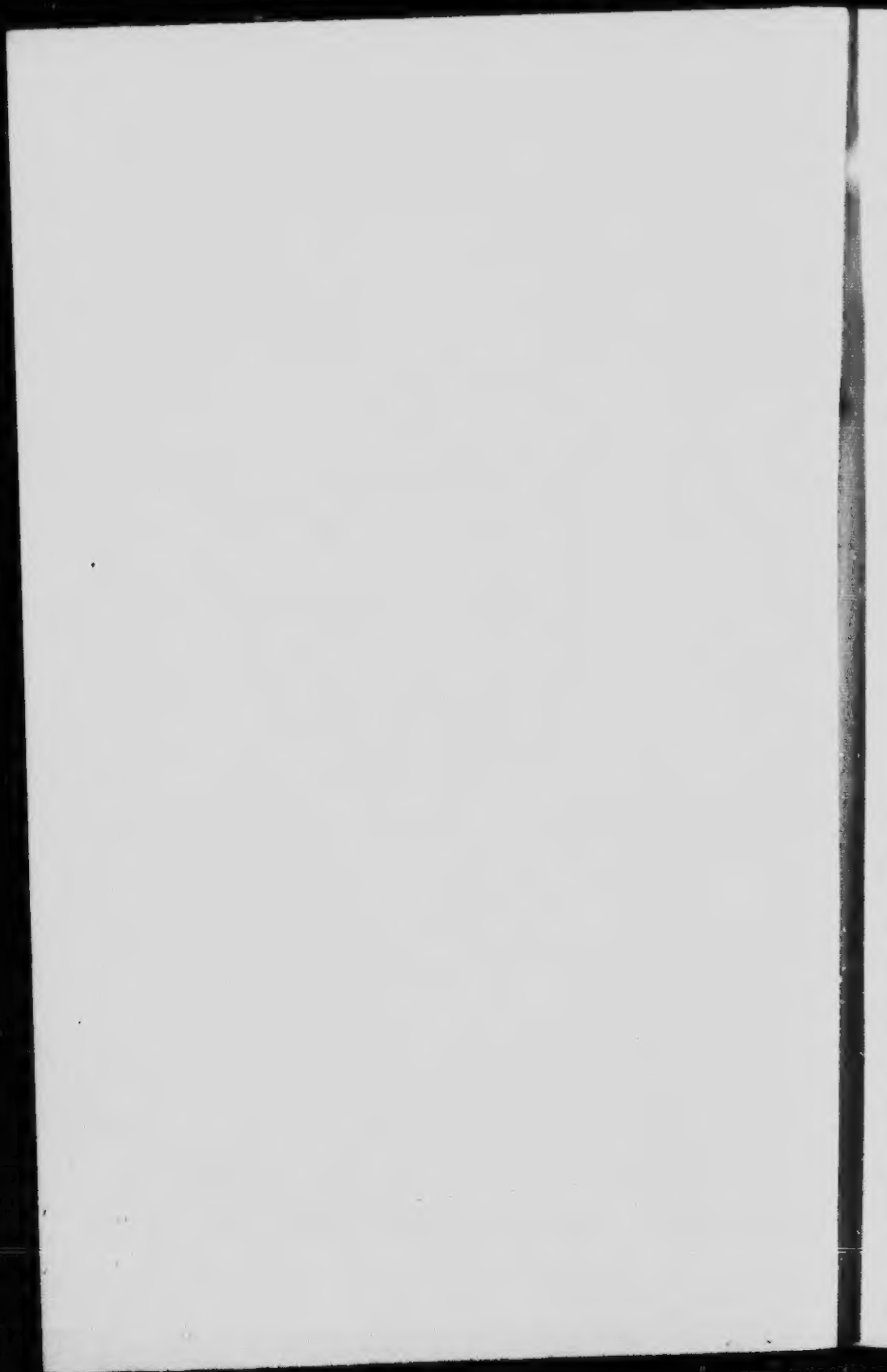


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BY
WILLIAM LE QUEUX

AUTHOR OF

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"WHO GIVETH THIS WOMAN?" "WHATSOEVER A MAN SOWETH,"
"OF ROYAL BLOOD," "FATAL THIRTEEN," ETC. ETC.

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LYING LIPS

CHAPTER I

THE THREE SIGNS

"AFTER all, not one of the Ten Commandments, by itself, says, 'Thou shalt not tell a lie!'"

"I admit that," I said, with a smile. "But we are told that lying lips are an abomination."

"Yes, I know—and that the sword is upon the liars."

"And somewhere—I forget where—it says that law is made for liars."

My travelling-companion laughed merrily, shaking her pretty head in disapproval.

At ten o'clock that wintry morning I had joined the London express at the Waverley Station in Edinburgh, having come down from the Highlands, and entering the dining-car found the other place at the *table à deux* occupied by a well-dressed, sweet-faced, and decidedly dainty young woman of about twenty-two, who at that moment was removing her hat, and with

all the assurance of the hardened traveller was preparing to make herself comfortable on the nine-hour journey to King's Cross.

She raised her clear blue eyes to mine for a second with a quick, inquisitive glance, as I took my seat, and then, apparently satisfied, disregarded my presence altogether, thus affording me opportunity for a covert examination.

She was *chic* to her finger-tips. Her single ornament was a brooch, but it was worth a couple of hundred pounds, if a penny. Neat, in a black tailor-made gown, showing a pale blue silk blouse beneath a perfectly cut coat, she busied herself with her dressing-bag as a woman will when travelling, diving for her smelling-salts and taking a sniff at them, afterwards producing a tiny lace handkerchief and some magazines.

Already she had wrapped her big black hat in a newspaper to protect it from the dust, and placed it upon the rack, a fact which showed her to be at least no novice in the art of travelling.

Once or twice after we had moved out of Waverley, and were slowly gathering speed towards the south, she had raised her eyes to mine with a modest, half-shy glance, and I saw how eminently beautiful she was. Her complexion was perfect, bearing only just the slightest trace of powder, which was surely permissible, while her features were, I think, the most regular and

most handsome I had ever seen in a woman. The more I glanced at her, the greater became my admiration. Her fair hair, so well dressed, gave to her beauty a sweet softness that was inexpressibly charming, while her slightly pointed chin and dimpled cheeks gave a bright piquancy to her face that one seldom found in a woman.

That she was a lady was undoubted. Her very refinement spoke mutely of birth and education, and yet in her eyes was a strange half-timid, half-appealing expression, which greatly puzzled me.

Old and constant traveller that I am, I make a point of always keeping myself to myself—especially where the fair sex are concerned. But on this occasion, whether I had become attracted by her beauty or by those strangely appealing glances which she now and then gave me, I somehow felt impelled to give her an opportunity for a chat.

There were not more than half a dozen other passengers in the long restaurant-car. Yet parallel with us a thin, narrow-faced, black-bearded man, with sharp, penetrating eyes, and wearing a light overcoat, had taken a seat, and now, I noticed, watched my divinity in black with just as much curiosity as I was doing.

The man, black-bearded, and by no means well dressed, presented the type of a North-

country commercial traveller, thin-faced, keen-eyed, alert, and brisk. But whatever his business, he had, no doubt, fallen a victim to the young lady's unusual beauty. Women are always quick to detect admiration, and I saw that she had already become conscious of it, and moreover that she resented it, for she so moved as to place her face out of the range of the stranger's line of vision, and then pretended to occupy herself with a magazine.

As the train approached Berwick I raised my eyes, and caught her gazing curiously at me from behind her book, gazing with a curious wistful look in those wonderful blue eyes, the depths of which seemed unfathomable.

In my own cosmopolitan life—a life spent for the most part at gay foreign resorts, at Aix or Monte, Vichy or Carlsbad, Biarritz or Cairo, Davos or Rome, just as the season and my own humour suited—I had met many pretty women, some whose beauty was world-renowned, some whose history perhaps would not bear putting into cold print. I had flirted, and gambled, and lived recklessly until now, at forty, I had become prematurely weary and blasé, a tired man-of-the-world, who had tasted of life's sweets until they had become nauseous. A woman to arouse curiosity within me had, I fear, to be more than ordinarily beautiful. Hence I found myself that well-remembered morning of

the eleventh of January, 1907, wondering who the remarkable girl could possibly be.

At first I had been inclined to put her down as some star of musical comedy, but critical observation showed that she possessed nothing to warrant that assumption.

Again I caught her looking at me with that strange expression, and at last, unable to restrain myself longer, I hazarded a remark.

Instantly her face was illuminated by a bright smile of satisfaction, and soon she became animated as we began to chat upon trivialities.

But the moment she opened her mouth she gave me a surprise. Though she spoke English perfectly, yet there was just the very faintest trace of a foreign accent, more especially in her "r's."

I tried to decide what nationality she was, but failed. She was from Eastern Europe, without a doubt, Hungarian perhaps, or perhaps Roumanian, Magyar, or even Slav.

Her voice was sweet and musical, and she seemed altogether winning and charming. While we were speaking, I noticed that the man in the opposite corner looked annoyed. He was envious of my good fortune in having such a delightful little travelling-companion.

"I arrived in Edinburgh yesterday, and it was so dreadfully dull all alone," she said presently. "It's the first time I've been in Scot-

land. The scenery is magnificent — like my own——”

And she hesitated, flushed slightly, and without concluding her sentence inquired whether I lived in Scotland.

“No,” I replied. “I live mostly on the Continent. I’m a sad wanderer—so my friends all tell me.”

I was in hope that she would explain whence she came, for I now realised that, though she spoke English so perfectly, yet she was a foreigner. Nevertheless, she preferred to ignore the fact, for she chattered on, discussing all sorts of topics. Suddenly, while we were speaking, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of the commercial traveller. He had raised his left hand to his forehead and I could have sworn that he gave my companion some secret sign!

Were they acquainted? If not, why had he given that sign? She had seen it, for I detected the shadow of annoyance upon her face, and the slight confused flush that followed.

The incident aroused my suspicion in an instant. I am rather quick to observe, due, I expect, to my long cosmopolitan training, and I recognised that between the pair existed some tacit agreement.

With what object?

I allowed the girl to chatter on, and we were

soon laughing lightly, as we sped towards Newcastle.

When the uniformed attendant came to lay the cloths for lunch, the stranger who had given the sign rose, seized his small handbag, and left the car, presumably to seek his own compartment.

When he had gone, my little companion, with a swift glance behind her to make sure she would not be overheard, bent across to me and said :

“ Did you notice that horrid man ? ”

I replied that I had.

“ Well, last night I had a most unpleasant experience,” she said. “ Being dull in the hotel, and knowing nobody in Edinburgh, I resolved to go alone to the theatre—a rather bold venture ! Well, on arrival at the box-office, I met this man, who smiled at me and who followed me up to the pay-desk. There were only two stalls left, and these the clerk gave me, believing the man to be my companion. I had to give him one back, and this being transferred to the horrid creature, I had him next me all the evening, endeavouring to press his unwelcome attentions upon me. I escaped back to the hotel in a cab after the performance was over, but judge my surprise and annoyance when on taking my seat here this morning the fellow entered. He is now following me to London ! ”

"The blackguard!" I cried. "You resent his infernal impudence, of course?"

"Yes, I do," she exclaimed. "I somehow don't like the look of him. He has peculiar eyes, hasn't he?"

That very feature had also struck me. They were cruel, crafty, criminal eyes.

"Well," I said. "I don't think he'll dare to speak to you here, in the train. Otherwise I might reply for you, Miss—I—I haven't the pleasure of your name," I added apologetically.

"Ashcroft," she said. "Lillah Ashcroft," she added.

"My name's Laird," I informed her; "Edgar Laird," and I took a card from my cigarette-case and handed it to her.

Yet I was puzzled, sorely puzzled. If that man was a stranger and she was so resentful of his attentions, why should he have given her that secret sign before leaving the restaurant-car?

Quick to suspect, I felt vaguely that she was endeavouring to mislead me. And yet what could be her motive?

While the attendant laid the little table between us for luncheon we chatted on, but I noticed that she seemed strangely nervous lest the dark-eyed stranger should return, for ever and anon she started, and glanced over her shoulder each time the door was opened.

"You are often abroad, I suppose?" I remarked presently. "At any rate, by the way you settled yourself down for the journey, I noted that you were no novice in travelling," I laughed.

"Yes," she answered, with just the slightest hesitation. "I travel a good deal—not much, however, in England."

"You are not English—eh?" I asked. "Though your name is very English."

"My father is English, hence I am English also, though I was born abroad," she said quickly.

"Your mother was not English—eh?"

"No. She was not," the girl replied, and then broke off into another topic, as though unwilling to tell me, a perfect stranger, anything more concerning herself or her affairs.

We at last stopped at Newcastle, where two of our fellow-travellers left, being replaced by two others, commercial men without a doubt. Suddenly we heard a man's voice at the end of the car exclaiming:

"Anyone of the name of Ashcroft?"

My dainty little companion started quickly, and, turning back to the man, beckoned him over.

"A telegram for you, miss," he said, "if that's the name?"

The girl broke open the envelope with trem-

bling fingers, and eagerly read the message. Whatever was written there caused her the deepest despair, for she sighed heavily, her lips grew hard, and all the light in an instant faded from her countenance.

For a few seconds she sat staring straight before her. In her blue eyes was a strange look of fascination as though she were held spell-bound by some horrible vision that had risen before her.

Then, as though suddenly recollecting my presence, she collected herself with strenuous effort, and slowly tore the telegram into tiny fragments, which she held in her hand until the train had moved out of the station.

Then she scattered them to the winds.

I hazarded the hope that she had not received very bad news.

She paused for a moment; then, looking straight into my eyes, said vaguely: "To some the news would be the most welcome they could receive. But to me," she added hoarsely, "to me it is the—the worst. To me—it means——"

But she bit her lip, and I saw that her splendid eyes were now filled with tears.

"Really, Miss Ashcroft," I said, "you must look always at the brightest side of the picture. And if I, though I'm stranger to you, can do anything whatever to render you a service, believe me I would be only too willing."

Again she sighed, and shook her head sadly.

"Ah, you are extremely kind, I'm sure," she answered. "But nothing that you can do could alter the position."

"Nothing whatever?"

"Nothing!"

At that moment the unwelcome stranger re-entered the car, and seating himself in the corner he had before occupied, commenced his luncheon, while we also commenced ours.

Then, when about half-way through, I distinctly saw my charming little companion exchange signs with the fellow.

It seemed that in order to show him that she understood, she would lean her elbow upon the table, and slowly rub her soft white palms together. This she did three times in succession.

She was certainly carrying on a secret conversation with the stranger by means of these signs, and of others.

For what reason?

I sat eating my lunch and chatting with her, my curiosity excited to its highest pitch, and full of wonderment.

CHAPTER II

CONCERNS THE UNEXPECTED

HAVING concluded his meal, the thin-faced stranger rose, and with another quick inquisitive glance at me, again left the restaurant-car.

"That fellow certainly seems unduly interested in us," I remarked to my companion when he had gone. "I felt once or twice much inclined to speak to him. He had his eyes fixed upon you the whole time."

She gave vent to a little sigh of relief, saying :

"Yes. But—well, I'm glad you refrained from creating a scene, Mr. Laird. Probably he won't return."

I had ventured on the remark in the hope that she might admit the truth. The story about the incident at the theatre I did not believe, and I think she realised that I doubted it. Yet, after all, such a slight perversion of the truth was certainly permissible in a pretty woman, and, indeed, there could be no two opinions regarding her extraordinary beauty.

Yet there was an air of mystery about herself

and about her movements that was distinctly curious. Even her nationality she was carefully concealing.

The afternoon wore slowly by as we halted in York, and then sped on swiftly towards Grantham.

Her depression, apparently caused by the stranger's proximity, had now given place to high spirits and merriment, and in the course of our chat she told me that she was on her way to join her father, who was living in Hounslow, about twelve miles out of London, westward.

"Your best way will be to go by train from King's Cross to Hammersmith, and then by the electric tram. That is," I added, "if you have no luggage."

"I've only my dressing-bag," she said. "I went that way once before. It is much easier than going by train from Waterloo."

Then we lapsed into silence and she began again to read her magazine, while I took up my paper.

We had discussed many things, and even the apprehension consequent upon the receipt of the telegram had now disappeared.

She sat with her great blue eyes fixed now upon the fleeting landscape, apparently thinking deeply. Then, after a time, she opened her dressing-bag, and taking from her small blotting-book a half-sheet of note-paper, pencilled something upon it.

From her manner I knew that she did not wish me to see. This excited my curiosity all the more, and I therefore managed to turn my paper so that I could get a covert glimpse of what she was writing.

It was unintelligible to me, but in wonder what it could mean, I glanced at it from time to time unnoticed by her, and made a mental note of it.

What she wrote slowly and with great care, was this :

8. 0. 3. 12. 3.

EUGENE.

9. 24. 18. 15. 2. 9. 16.

6. 1. 2. 3. 22. 22. 12. 18.

RUE BLANCHE, 196A. 3ME.

THE BLACK THREE.

More than once, while tracing that puzzling array of figures, she raised her eyes to see if I were looking, and having satisfied herself that I was not, continued. Then, having finished, she carefully folded the paper and slipped it into her glove.

Was it possible that she intended to give it in secret to the thin-faced stranger ?

In order that I should not forget that curious arrangement of figures, I rose, and making an excuse that I wanted a telegraph form, passed

through into the next car, when upon the back of an envelope I wrote down what I had just committed to memory. That it was some cipher was quite plain, and it was without a doubt intended for the man who had exchanged those curious secret signs with her as we had eaten our meal together.

The Rue Blanche! There were many streets of that name in France. Nearly every provincial town boasted one, and as for the Rue Blanche in Paris, I knew it well. It ran steeply from the Church of the Trinité up to the Montmartre. But who were "The Black Three" I wondered?

The mystery surrounding this girl Lillah Ashcroft increased as each hour went by.

I returned again to my seat, but as darkness drew in and we approached Peterborough, there was every evidence of a gathering fog. The train slowed down, and we were stopped once or twice by adverse signals. Instead of swinging through Peterborough on the non-stop run from Graham to London, as is usual, we pulled up for fully ten minutes outside the station.

"There's a bad fog in London, they say," the attendant remarked to me as he passed.

Whereupon I turned to my charming little companion, and remarked:

"That will be a bit awkward for you, I fear,

Miss Ashcroft. To cross London in a fog is not at all pleasant."

"Oh! I don't mind!" she declared, "I shall get home all right. I'm used to travelling, you know."

She still held the scrap of paper with the cipher message upon it beneath her brown kid glove. For whom could it be intended?

Tea was served, and as we neared London our pace became slower on account of the increasing density of the fog. I somehow began to regret that in an hour we should part, never perhaps to meet again.

I mentioned that fact, whereat she laughed, just a trifle nervously, I thought, and answered:

"Oh! the world is really a very small place, Mr. Laird. You—well, you may perhaps one day hear of me again—who knows?"

Hear of her! Why had she not said that I might perhaps see her?

"Well," I said, "I should be most delighted to renew this very pleasant acquaintanceship, either here or abroad. You have my address on my card, but—but I have not the pleasure of knowing yours."

"Ah!" she replied. "My father and I have no fixed abode nowadays. We are nearly always travelling."

"But you said you lived at Hounslow!"

"Only temporarily. To-morrow we may go abroad again."

Yes. She was a complete mystery. She had attracted me more, perhaps, than any other woman in the whole course of my life. I felt a keen anxiety to see her safely to her destination, yet when I told her so, declaring that the evening was unfit for a lady to be out alone, she laughed at my fears, declaring that she was quite well able to take care of herself.

At last, more than an hour late, we crept slowly into King's Cross, where the fog was so thick that the station was half obscured.

On alighting I looked around for the thin-faced stranger, but he was nowhere to be seen.

With a light mischievous laugh she gave me permission to accompany her as far as the subway which leads from the Great Northern to the Underground Railway, and through the suffocating blackness we hurried together.

Then, just as we were about to part, and when she had taken my hand, she looked at me again with those wistful, appealing eyes, and said with her pretty accent :

" It is awfully kind of you to have looked after me like this, Mr. Laird. I—I wonder if we should ever meet again, whether you would still be my friend ? "

" Your friend, Miss Ashcroft ? " I echoed.
 " Why, of course. I'm only too anxious. You have only to send me word, and I shall be ever ready to assist you at any time."

"Ah!" she sighed, deeply. "I—I wonder if you would really be my friend—if—well—if you knew the truth."

"About what?"

"About me."

"The truth matters nothing, whatever it may be," was my reply. "Please rely upon me to remain your friend."

For a second she hesitated.

"It is really very good of you," she declared, sighing again. "I now regard you as my true friend. And if we have never again to meet, perhaps you may sometimes recollect the day you spent with Lillah Ashcroft—a woman who is outside the pale of——"

Her lips were pressed together, and I saw that tears stood in her splendid eyes.

"Why—what are you saying?" I asked, her trembling hand still in mine.

"The truth," was her response. "Good-bye."

And a second later she had turned and was lost in that hurrying crowd of City workers rushing homewards.

As later on I drove to my rooms in Savoy Court, I fell to wondering what had become of that bearded stranger with whom the pretty Lillah had exchanged those curious signs. The fog was denser as I drove towards the Strand. Indeed, the man had to descend from his box,

CONCERNS THE UNEXPECTED 27

and lead the horse across Oxford Street and down Long Acre and Bow Street into the yard of the "Savoy." Surely it was not a night for any woman to be out alone.

I regretted that the girl had refused to give me her address at Hounslow, yet I could quite see that she was concealing from me certain facts of which she seemed ashamed. And as later on that evening I sat before my fire in the cosy little flat I occupied adjoining the Savoy Hotel, I took out the old envelope on which I had scribbled from memory the strange cipher which she had traced.

But I could make neither head nor tail of it. Therefore I placed it aside, and afterwards had supper with some friends in the gay red-carpeted restaurant below.

Next morning, about twelve o'clock, I was writing letters in my green-and-white sitting-room, the embellishment of which was, according to the proprietors of that great block of residential flats, a triumph of modern decorative art, when my man entered, saying that a gentleman desired to see me, and handing me a card upon which was inscribed the name "Mr. Philip Pontifex."

A moment later a well-dressed man was ushered in, and we bowed to each other. His stout, well-nourished, well-clad figure, and broad, round face, with its very thick sensual lips, flat

nose, and carefully cropped hair, were of that international type of professional financier you can meet upon every Stock Exchange in Europe. His eyes, however, were entirely expressionless. Protruding, dark, filmy, they reflected as little of his mind as those of a fish. And yet his narrow, low forehead and heavy jaws showed great strength of will and resolution, as well as insatiable instincts.

He was profuse in his apologies for disturbing me, and when I had invited him to a chair he said :

"I am here as messenger from—from a lady whose acquaintance I believe you have made—Miss Lillah Ashcroft."

"Yes," I replied, "I met the lady in question yesterday."

"Well," he said, "something—something of a *contretemps* has happened, and she has sent me to inquire whether you would go to her; she desires to see you."

"Where?" I inquired, in some surprise.

"At Feltham Station—at half-past nine this evening."

"That's beyond Hounslow," I said quickly.

"Yes," my visitor said. "A train leaves Waterloo for Feltham at 9.7."

"But why hasn't she written to me?" I queried.

"She has," was his reply, and he produced a

note from her asking me to meet her at Feltham, and requesting a verbal reply by the bearer.

What could she desire, I wondered!

The note was in a neat educated feminine hand which, however, betrayed in certain of its letters the foreign model.

"You have no idea of the nature of the lady's business with me, Mr.—Mr. Pontifex?" I asked, looking straight into his dull eyes.

"Not the slightest. Miss Ashcroft merely asked me to call upon you and deliver the message to you in secret," was his reply. "There appears to be some reason why she does not desire others to be aware of your clandestine meeting with her."

"A lover possibly?"

He only smiled, without replying.

My quick eyes had noted that my visitor was a prosperous man-of-the-world. Therefore I informed him that if Miss Ashcroft so urgently desired to speak with me I would keep the appointment.

When he had left I sat staring into the fire and wondering. Why had not my neat little travelling-companion telegraphed to me to redeem my promise of assistance? Why had she sent that man Pontifex? What relation could he be to her?

These, and a thousand other thoughts surged through my mind as I sat alone at luncheon.

Afterwards I had several callers, men I knew, and about six o'clock, Seddon, my man, brought me the evening paper, which I lazily opened as I lit a fresh cigarette.

It contained a sensation—a sensation which was to me, intensely interesting. As I read I held my breath in utter amazement. The story, ornamented by great bold head-lines, was utterly astounding.

I read every line with keen avidity.

Printed in the newspaper, half-way down the column, and embellished by cross head-lines, was that same puzzling array of numerals with the name Eugene, and the address in the Rue Blanche which Lillah Ashcroft had written in my presence, and an exact copy of which reposed in my pocket at that very moment.

The story was unexpected, astounding, startling!

Those printed lines danced before my excited gaze.

Yes, the blue-eyed girl was a mystery—a mystery most remarkable and complete. What I read there fascinated and appalled me.

I never dreamt that my chance acquaintance with that pretty fair-haired girl, so *chic* and so ultra-cosmopolitan, would result in my being drawn into a vortex of doubt and mystery. A veritable maelstrom of tangled perplexity which from that moment held me fettered, spellbound.

and enthralled, just as I venture to believe its narrative—which I have here set down in black and white—will hold you, my reader, astounded to the end.

The story I read in the columns of that newspaper was startling, amazing, undreamed of. And the more so, indeed, because my visitor, Philip Pontifex, had promised me that I should resume my acquaintance with her that same evening at half-past nine.

I glanced at the final line of that curious cipher printed half-way down the column:

"THE BLACK THREE."

Yes. Those words were significant—most significant.

And yet what I had read formed a probability that was utterly inscrutable.

CHAPTER III

RECOUNTS A STRANGE AFFAIR

IN order to place upon record the exact facts, I cannot perhaps do better than reproduce the extract from the newspaper in its entirety.

What I read was as follows :

“ At an early hour this morning a labourer, named Wootton, while on his way to work between Gerrard’s Cross, about six miles from Uxbridge, and Fulmer village, was skirting the Duke’s Wood, when, lying upon his face, close to the hedge, he discovered the body of a well-dressed man.

“ No second glance was necessary to show that the unfortunate young man was dead, but in what manner he had met his death was not apparent. Wootton hurried back at once to Gerrard’s Cross for assistance, and soon two officers of the Bucks. Constabulary, together with Doctor Moore, of Beaconsfield, and several other persons, were quickly upon the scene.

“ The medical examination showed that the actual cause of death was a mystery.

“ Upon the grass by the roadside several marks

RECOUNTS A STRANGE AFFAIR 33

of blood were discovered by the police, but there were no evidences that any struggle had taken place. In the frozen mud of the road were many footprints of people who had passed and re-passed during the previous day, therefore it was impossible to distinguish those of the young man's assailant.

"The strange affair presents a number of very remarkable features, telegraphs our Uxbridge correspondent, not the least curious of which is the absence of any wound which would have a fatal result.

"Doctor Moore called into consultation Doctor Greenwell, of Uxbridge, but both have declared the cause of death to be a mystery, a fact which has already been communicated to the Coroner for Bucks.

"The body having been photographed in the position in which it was found, was removed to Gerrard's Cross, where the *post-mortem* will be probably made this evening. We give below a photograph of the spot where the dead man was found, taken by our correspondent this morning.

"In the removal of the corpse it was searched, and several articles of value were discovered in the pockets, articles which may assist the police materially in establishing the dead man's identity.

"Among other things which the assassin had

left untouched were a gold watch bearing the name of a well-known jeweller in the Rue de la Paix in Paris, a tiny ancient bronze Egyptian statue of the god Osiris, about eleven pounds in money, an Italian bank-note for fifty lire, but no letters or cards of any kind. His card-case was upon him, but empty, while from the inner pocket of his coat, from the band of his waistcoat and from the band of his trousers the tailor's tabs with his name had evidently been roughly torn.

"It seems as though the assassin, whoever he was, must have been aware that his victim's underclothing bore no laundry mark, for it was undisturbed.

"Of course, the theory may be held that the young man himself had removed his name from his own clothing; but the rough, hurried manner in which the small buckram labels have been torn out lends colour to this idea that it is the work of the assassin.

"Up to the present no knife or other weapon has been found.

"One fact which is causing great interest locally and has inspired the hope of the police in being successful in tracing the dead man's identity, is the discovery in his breast pocket of a crumpled half-sheet of notepaper—of a pale grey tint, such as a lady would use—with a curious cipher inscribed in a feminine hand.

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The police had it photographed this morning, and we are fortunately enabled to here reproduce it :

8. 0. 3. 12. 3.

EUGENE.

9. 24. 18. 15. 2. 9. 16.

6. 1. 2. 3. 22. 22. 12. 18.

RUE BLANCHE, 196A, 3ME.

THE BLACK THREE.

"Other articles found in the dead man's pockets include a small pen-knife, the key of a 'Yale' lock numbered 859412, a thin square key of another American lock called the 'Columbia,' numbered 1094, and a plain silver cigarette case engraved with an escutcheon which in heraldic language may be described as *ermine naissant from a fess azure, a demi-lion rampant argent*—a common charge regarding which the police have already telegraphed to Heralds' College. Within the case, however, is engraved an inscription which the detectives engaged in the case are hopeful may lead them to some elucidation of the mystery. The words are : 'From Lillah, 1906.'

"From information which the police have already gathered it appears that a porter at Gerrard's Cross Station recollects that a young man answering deceased's description alighted

from the train which left Paddington last night at 9 and arrived there at 9.41. The young man, who appeared to be a stranger in the neighbourhood, inquired the way to Hedgerley village, about two miles distant. It was a misty night, and the porter gave him minute directions, receiving sixpence for his trouble. Then the young man went forth into the darkness, and, apparently was not again seen alive.

“Another statement made at noon to-day by the assistant schoolmaster at Hedgerley, named Franklin, is of considerable importance. He says that he had been on a visit to Fulmer last night, and started to walk back to Hedgerley just before eleven, taking the road where the body was subsequently found. The mist was very thick, yet when he approached the Duke's Wood, he heard voices in front of him, though the fog obscured everything. He distinctly overheard two voices—those of a man and a woman. They were speaking excitedly in some foreign language, which was neither French nor German. And as they appeared to be quarrelling, he put them down to be foreign tramps, and gave them a wide berth. He reached his home at a quarter to twelve, and thought no more of the incident until he heard of the startling discovery of the young man's body.

“The local police, who are already in communication with Scotland Yard, are very hope-

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ful that the discovery of the scrap of paper bearing the cipher message and the inscription, 'From Lillah,' will enable them very shortly to establish the dead man's identity.

"At present, however, the whole affair is shrouded in mystery, and has created the greatest sensation in Uxbridge and the neighbourhood."

The photograph of the half-sheet of notepaper reproduced in the journal was undoubtedly that of the cipher penned by Lillah Ashcroft. I recollected the peculiarity of the capital "E" in "Eugene." Then I compared it with the note handed to me by the mysterious Mr. Pontifex, but to my surprise few of the characteristics shown in the reproduced photograph were apparent in the letter.

Again and again I tried to decipher the meaning of that puzzling array of numerals. That it contained a secret message was certain. Perhaps it was a reply to the telegram she had received at Newcastle.

At any rate, the fact remained that although I took my leave of my little travelling companion shortly after seven o'clock at King's Cross, the scrap of paper she held in her glove was in possession of the unknown man at nine o'clock, when he must have left Paddington for Gerrard's Cross.

His cigarette case was her gift. Was the

cipher she had traced some serious warning? Perhaps she knew that evil was intended.

To me it was quite patent that when she made the appointment to meet me at Feltham Station she never expected that I should see the account of the fate that had befallen the young man who bore her written message. Indeed, was it not quite within the bounds of possibility that she had been ignorant of the occurrence of that tragedy?

After leaving me she had, no doubt, met the young man secretly and had given him the cipher she had prepared. Or, what was perhaps more feasible, she had given the cipher to someone to give to him. If she had any message to convey to him and had met him personally, she would have informed him verbally. In such a case, the cipher would have been useless.

Again, she was a foreigner, and according to the assistant schoolmaster Franklin, there was a woman in the road speaking in some foreign tongue that was neither French nor German. Could it have been she? Carefully I re-read the newspaper account, weighing every word. My theory was that the unknown victim was the pretty Lillah's lover, and that jealousy had prompted that terrible assassination which the journalist so graphically described.

Within the next three hours I should meet her face to face, and surely I might, with the

exercise of care, allude to what I had just read.

I recollected those strange words of hers—that declaration that she was a woman outside the pale of society. What did she mean?

The reason was now quite plain why she had not permitted me to see her through the foggy night as far as the electric tram at Hammer-smith for Hounslow.

In all probability she never went there at all. Indeed, for aught I knew, the story of her residence with her father at Hounslow might be a mere fabrication. And yet, when I reflected I could not disguise from myself that Lillah Ashcroft had been sorely troubled. That strange intense look in her splendid eyes spoke mutely of some hidden apprehension, some bitter story which she would, I believe, have confided to me if she had only dared.

It occurred to me that if the Bucks. police had invoked the aid of New Scotland Yard, then in all probability my friend Inspector Miller would be entrusted with the inquiries, the reason being because the assistant schoolmaster had declared that the people he heard near the spot were speaking in a foreign tongue. Miller, whose real name was Müller, was by birth a Pole, and, being a splendid linguist, was generally in charge of extradition cases. He was a terror to the foreign criminal in London, and

many an alien who had sought refuge in this free England of ours after a criminal career on the Continent had bitter cause to recollect his big burly figure, his deep voice, and his iron grip.

Indeed, he made regular trips between Harwich and Hamburg to hand over German criminals wanted back by the German police. His record as a hunter of the foreign criminal was perhaps a unique one, for, being a foreigner of a most pronounced type himself, he needed but little disguise to penetrate into the most distant recesses of alien London, into dens indeed where the ordinary English detective dare not show his face without nullifying all his inquiries.

Then, later on, I ate my dinner alone, impatient to meet again my charming little friend of the previous day—that fair-faced woman who was so mysteriously linked with the unknown victim of that tragedy of the night.

CHAPTER IV

MORE THAT IS MYSTERIOUS

FELTHAM lies between the two riverside towns of Twickenham and Staines, an overgrown and unimportant village in the midst of market gardens.

Though Twickenham has been in the past ten years or so extended by the "jerry-builder" so that one hardly recognises it, yet Feltham grows slowly. It is unattractive as a suburban residence and is still out of reach of the colonising influence of those whizzing electric trams. A flat dreary waste of land stretches about it across to Bedfont or to Sunbury, and further, it lies off the main roads running westward out of London.

When I descended at the dark little station by the train which Mr. Pontifex had indicated, rain was falling slightly, and the night was distinctly unpleasant. Fortunately I had put on a Burberry which I used for shooting, and a pair of thick boots, for I knew that the country roads would be bad after the melting snows of the past week or so.

Only three or four other persons got out of the train, City men no doubt, and these I allowed to hurry out of the station, walking leisurely on behind them. Outside, I glanced around, peering into the darkness, but was disappointed. No one was awaiting me.

Had I been fooled, I wondered ?

The station approach was not well lit, but I walked in the direction of the highway, where the lights of an inn shone across the wet road. In those unfamiliar surroundings I stumbled and floundered into pools of water and mud.

At last, however, just as I gained the roadway a figure emerged from the deep shadow beneath a fence, and, approaching me, uttered my name.

In an instant I recognised the low musical voice, and my heart gave a bound. It was Lillah.

"I almost began to think that you were not here!" I remarked, when I found tongue.

The mystery of that tragedy in Buckinghamshire had at that moment flashed across my confused mind, arousing within me a quick suspicion.

"I don't wish to be seen by anyone leaving the station," she explained. "I've been watching you ever since you got out of the train. It is so very kind of you to come and see me."

"A great pleasure, I assure you, Miss Ashcroft," I declared, as I strolled at her side away

into the darkness. Surely, having in view the tragedy of which I had just read, our meeting was a most romantic one.

"You will remember," I went on, "that when we parted at King's Cross last night I promised to stand your friend, and—well, I'm here to endeavour to render you whatever assistance you may require."

I spoke those words in order to allow her free opportunity of explanation. I hoped that she might refer to that strange affair, news of which had startled all London.

But my disappointment was great.

She merely thanked me, in a low, nervous voice.

"You're awfully kind," she declared, with just a trace of her pretty accent. "I expect you thought it strange when Mr. Pontifex called upon you with my rather bold request."

"Not at all," I said, "though I confess I was surprised that you should send Mr. Pontifex."

"Well, I couldn't very well come to your rooms myself, could I?"

"So you sent your friend," I laughed. "Who is he?"

She hesitated for a few seconds.

"Well," she said, with some hesitation, "he is one of the very few persons whom I can trust."

"An intimate friend, then?"

"Well—yes. Perhaps you would call him that," was her rather vague answer.

We had turned our backs upon the lights of Feltham, and had set out upon a dark country road, dim and uncertain in the obscurity of night. I judged that it was the road I had noticed on the map earlier in the evening, which ran across to Bedfont and there joined the broad main highway from London to Staines and Windsor.

I tried to obtain some details regarding the prosperous man with the thick lips who had treated me with such studied politeness when he had called, but she would only tell me that he was a great friend of her father's, and that being desirous of seeing me that night she had ventured to ask him to call with her message.

"I knew," she added, "that he, of all men, would preserve my secret."

"What secret?" I asked.

"The secret of this meeting," she replied quickly. "I have come here at great risk to myself. Like everyone else, Mr. Laird, I have enemies, and if they knew that I had met you to-night, both you and I might—well, we might fare badly."

"I don't quite follow you," I said, rather surprised at her words.

"I mean that some of my friends are—to put it quite plainly—rather unscrupulous. They

would never approve of me meeting you, a stranger, clandestinely, like this."

"Why not?"

"Because they would suspect."

"Suspect what?"

"Suspect me of telling something which is a secret—something you ought not to know," she replied.

"But you haven't done so," I laughed. "I presume you have invited me to meet you in order to tell me this—this something?"

She did not reply. She was walking slowly at my side, and as she did so I distinctly heard her draw a long, deep breath.

I longed to broach the subject of the strange death of that young man at present unidentified. But in the circumstances it was surely difficult.

As we strolled together regardless of the drizzling rain, I gave her every opportunity to tell me the reason she wished to consult me, but she seemed nervous and afraid. In the obscurity of night I could not now distinguish her face, yet I knew from her trembling voice that she was much agitated and full of fear.

To allow her opportunity for self-composure, I asked how she had fared in the fog after leaving me.

"Oh! I got home all right," she replied brightly. "I was hours late, of course, but the

fog made but little difference on the underground railway, and the electric car from Hammersmith Broadway deposited me within a hundred yards or so of my own door. My father had become dreadfully concerned about me."

"Then you were very late?" I remarked, recollecting the story told by the assistant schoolmaster at Gerrard's Cross.

"Very."

"And now tell me, Miss Ashcroft," I said after a brief pause, "in what way can I assist you? As I explained to your friend Mr. Pontifex, I am ready to be of any service possible."

She held her breath. I tried to distinguish the expression upon her face, but was unable. But after all, was her agitation surprising when the man who was, no doubt, her lover had been secretly done to death?

"All this afternoon I've been thinking it over," she said very slowly, "and I've come to the conclusion that what I require is far too much to ask of you, Mr. Laird, perfect stranger that you are."

"I admit that we are strangers," I said. "Yet did we not agree to become friends? I make but few friends nowadays, Miss Ashcroft," I went on. "I've become far too much of a cosmopolitan. I have many acquaintances in

every capital of Europe, but very, very few real friends."

"Ah!" she sighed, sadly. "It is just the same with my father and myself. True friends are indeed very few and far between. When one has money, one can command friends, but when prosperity wanes friends quickly drop away. We have found it so."

She spoke as though they had fallen upon adverse times, yet the brooch she had worn on the previous day, her dress, and her handsome travelling-bag had betrayed no evidence of a struggle with poverty.

"And you decline to accept my proffered assistance, eh?" I asked.

"No," was her reply. "I—I only fear to ask you."

"Ask. I assure you I shall not be annoyed," I declared, and as I strolled at her side I wondered what her request would be.

"..." she laughed nervously. "But it would seem to you—man of the world that you are—too utterly absurd! You'd think that my extraordinary request was that of a woman who'd taken leave of her senses."

I felt that she was fooling me, and I resented it. She seemed to have brought me down there on a fool's errand. Yet had she not been, in a certain sense, frank and open on the previous day? Had she not declared herself to be an

undesirable person, a woman beyond the pale? The more I saw of her, the more completely shrouded in mystery she seemed to become.

"I confess, Miss Ashcroft, that I take a deep interest in you and in your welfare," I said. "We all of us go through our lives careless and unobservant, until one day we chance to meet one who is, to us, more attractive than the rest, one with whom we find we have an affinity of soul."

"Do you really think that our souls have an affinity?" she asked in a far-away, dreamy voice. "Isn't it strange? That very same thought occurred to me only this morning."

"I think they have," I replied. "At any rate I am at least yours to command, Miss Ashcroft. You have admitted that you require a friend. I hope you will at least allow myself to be that friend," I added in a voice full of earnestness.

"I—I will!" was her low, hoarse reply, as involuntarily, without knowing what she did, she clutched at my coat sleeve, and I felt her slim gloved hand trembling.

We were trudging on through the winter slush, our faces set towards the far distance, where glimmered the lights of Bedfont village and the blue lamp of that police-station which so many motorists on the Staines road have bitter cause to recollect.

"Well?" I asked. "What do you desire me to do?"

Scarce had I uttered that inquiry when I became vaguely conscious that behind us someone was stealthily following. I halted suddenly, on the pretext of tying the lace of my boot, and she pulled up also.

My ears were strained back into the darkness. Yes, I could distinctly hear someone softly following, probably treading the sodden grass by the roadside.

I made no remark, fearing lest she might become unnerved. She was already unstrung and anxious—because of the secret assassination of her lover, without a doubt. Yet I had somehow scented danger. Whenever I have had a precursory feeling of evil I have always afterwards realised some just cause for it.

At that moment I felt a shadow of evil spread about me. I blamed myself for so foolishly keeping that secret tryst with a woman who, though so very beautiful, was after all a mere stranger, upon whom lay a dread suspicion.

The footsteps, soft and stealthy, were still approaching. We were being followed, probably with evil intent.

Yet I laughed within myself at my fears, for had I not in my hip-pocket my handy little plated revolver without which I as a cosmopolitan never moved. I felt my pocket. It was

still there, and it gave me courage, just as it had so often done in many an out-of-the-world corner abroad.

"What do you want me to do?" I repeated, in a low eager voice, as I bent to her.

"Ah!" she cried quickly. "Forgive me if I—I annoy you! But the fact is that I am in a great peril—my life is in imminent danger! I am in sore need of a friend—a real true friend who would protect me as—as a husband would protect a wife!"

"Why are you in peril?" I asked in a deep voice. "What danger threatens you?"

"Ah! I—I dare not reveal all the tragic truth to you, Mr. Laird. You'd never believe me—you would misjudge me and no doubt turn aside from me!" she cried hoarsely. "No, you would no longer offer yourself as my friend!"

"I don't understand! You are speaking in enigmas," I declared.

"Is it any wonder?" she cried hoarsely. "Is it any wonder that I should have become desperate when—when I am face to face with death, as I am to-night?"

"With death?" I gasped, the recollection of what that night's paper contained flashing through my mind. "And you desire me to endeavour to save you?"

She sighed an unspoken affirmative.

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"How?"

For a few seconds the mysterious girl was silent.

Then she spoke. I listened to her quick panting words. She made a suggestion—a strange, startling, and altogether remarkable suggestion. I halted there in the darkness too amazed, too bewildered to utter response.

CHAPTER V

WHO IS MR. PONTIFEX ?

THE suggestion my neat little companion made to me was certainly characterised by a boldness which I had never expected from her.

And yet I knew, from her manner and her voice, that she was desperate.

"If you wish to help me out of what is a situation of direst peril, Mr. Laird," she said, "it will be necessary for you to grant me a very curious unheard-of request—namely, that you go abroad with me, and allow me to pass as your sister!"

"My sister!" I gasped, when at last I found tongue. "But I have no sister."

"I know," she exclaimed.

"How did you know that?" I demanded quickly.

"I have ascertained that you have only one brother. Had you a sister I would not have dared to make this suggestion," she said.

This struck me as distinctly curious. The inquiry had probably been made by the man Pontifex.

" But I don't quite see the motive," I said.
 " Why should you desire to pose as my sister ? "

" For a certain reason, only known to myself," she laughed nervously. " But, of course, I knew that if I suggested it you would only regard me as half demented. That is why I have hesitated. You would never permit it, I feel sure."

" Well," I said, " your request, Miss Ashcroft, is, to say the least, a trifle unusual. For a lady to pass as a bachelor's sister is—well, hardly a respect of the *convenances*, is it ? "

" What care I for the *convenances* ? " she cried quickly. " Ah ! Mr. Laird, you don't know—you don't dream the truth. In my desperation to-night I—I'm hardly myself, I admit. But pray forgive me. Have pity upon me," she implored.

" There is nothing to forgive," I assured her, at the same time full of wonder at her audacious proposal that I should take her on the Continent as my sister.

I realised that her intention was to escape from the country in the guise of my sister—a suspicious fact in itself. Hers was, after all, a most unusual, even astounding, request, and the more so because she, or rather Pontifex, had already made inquiry regarding me, and evidently discovered that I was an irresponsible and constant traveller, and that so long as I was moving up and down Europe it mattered nothing

to me whether I were in Stockholm or Siena, Berlin or Barcelona, or anywhere else, for that matter.

The man Pontifex, so strikingly polite and so typically the prosperous financier, was in the secret, without a doubt. I held him from that moment in instinctive suspicion and dislike.

"I know that my request is one that you can never grant," the girl declared. "How could you possibly be bothered with me—a woman? Besides, you could not move among people you knew. You'd have to live in towns where you are unknown, and if what I hear is correct, the popular resorts are few where you would not be recognised."

Did she intend that for flattery, or was she in dead earnest? I think the latter, for she was desperate.

What was the dread peril in which she found herself? It had some connection with her lover's death—of that I felt confident.

Was it possible that it had been her voice which the man Franklin had heard? Was it not possible to put the theory to the test? The very suggestion renewed hope within me. If necessary I would put the idea to Inspector Miller—or better, carry out the experiment myself.

In any case, she was carefully concealing from me all knowledge of that dark affair near Ger-

rard's Cross. That she was aware of it seemed proved by her desire to assume the identity of my sister.

"To carry out your suggestion successfully would entail considerable difficulty," I exclaimed, "and your position, if the truth became revealed, would be a somewhat unenviable one."

"It could not be worse than it is to-night," she declared in a hard strained voice. "I live in dread of what the next hour may bring. My future is entirely and utterly hopeless. Ah! Mr. Laird, if I only dare confide in you—if only I dared to tell you the hideous, awful truth!"

"Why not?" I suggested in sympathy. "Have I not declared myself to be your friend?"

"Yes—but——" and she broke off short, fearing, it seemed, to reveal the true state of affairs.

It struck me as curious that if her lover had been a victim of a plot she did not mention the fact of his decease. As she was silent, it seemed very much as though she were in some way implicated in the tragic affair.

"Well," I said at last, "suppose I agreed that you should in future be known as Miss Laird, my sister—suppose——"

"Ah! but you would never do that," she declared in deep despair. "You are generous, I know, but there is a limit to a man's generosity when it touches his own honour."

"I said—suppose," I remarked rather firmly.

"Well, suppose I consented, what would you require me to do?"

"I'd want you to act quickly—to get me away out of England—abroad, anywhere, so long as I could live in safety, and escape my enemies."

"Your enemies! Who are they?"

"Certain persons who are as unscrupulous as they are daring. Men who defy the law."

"You mean you wish to escape from the country in secret and live in secret abroad—where?"

"In Spain, in Russia, or Hungary—or perhaps Italy," she replied. "It matters little, so long as I pass as your sister. I—I could keep house for you, and you could be absent mostly," and she laughed a nervous little laugh. "I should really not be too exacting."

"You would need a companion."

"She could easily be found. She would believe me to be actually your sister."

Her suggestion was certainly one full of romance. Here was a pretty girl, the most dainty, *piquante* creature I had ever met, calmly proposing that she should pose as my sister!"

"I think, in these circumstances, Miss Ashcroft, that you should deal with me a little more frankly," I said in a tone of complaint. "Tell me why you are so anxious to get abroad. What does your father say?"

"He has already left. I am alone," was her

low response. Then, after a slight pause, she added, " But there—Mr. Laird, if you feel that you cannot trust me, it is best to say so openly, and—and abandon me now to my fate."

" And that would be—what ? "

" Death ! " she cried hoarsely. " Only death—and to-night ! "

" Come, come," I said, endeavouring to comfort her. " Don't say that ! You are unnerved—quite unlike yourself of yesterday."

" I know I am," the girl cried. " Have I not told you that I am desperate. I must get away to escape my enemies."

" And cannot your friend, Mr. Pontifex, assist you ? " I hazarded, turning to her in the darkness.

" No. He is unable. If I were seen in his company it would mean disaster."

" Why has your father left so suddenly ? "

" He waited to see me last night, but he left Charing Cross at nine this morning for the Continent."

" What was his destination ? "

" Galatz—on the Danube."

" Why did he not take you with him ? "

" Because he explained that he was moving quickly, and that he could not be hampered by me. He was compelled, much against his will, to leave me. Then I recollected your kind words last night, and sent Mr. Pontifex to you."

The fact that the girl's father had left London

suddenly by the first service to the Continent was, to me, a distinctly suspicious circumstance. He had departed from England before news of that curious tragedy in Buckinghamshire had reached London. But why had he left Lillah behind? The girl had told me that her father was English, and that her mother had been foreign. Ashcroft was a thoroughly English name, and I had more than once wondered what manner of man he could be, and what was his occupation.

The fact of temporarily living in such a place as Hounslow seemed to imply that he was "lying low" for some purpose or another. Hounslow is a suburb more or less poor and obscure. It possesses no attraction of the Thames bank like Richmond, Twickenham, or Isleworth. Its long High Street is meagre and inartistic, and mainly notable for the number of public-houses it contains. In the old coaching days it was the first stage out of London on the Bath Road, while beyond, out upon the Heath, many a coach had been held up by the dare-devil Turpin, or the exquisite Duval. But alas! in these days the place has sadly degenerated into almost a working-class suburb.

It was just the kind of spot in which a man might easily conceal his identity, and it struck me that this Mr. Ashcroft had resided there for some very good reason.

We were now approaching Bedfont, while away on our right lay the historic Hounslow Heath. The road was dark and deserted, yet still behind us sounded those soft footsteps of some person following.

Curiously enough, my little companion, so entirely occupied with her own thoughts, failed to detect them. Perhaps her sense of hearing was not so sharp as my own !

She was silent—awaiting my decision. The problem she had put before me, however, was a very serious one, rendered the more complex by the strange death of that unknown man who had her cipher message in his possession, and in whose cigarette-case was engraved her name.

All eagerness to escape from the country, she now apparently disregarded everything. Haunted by a dread terror, she was driven to sheer desperation, driven to make a request to me which was, in itself, most astounding and unusual.

I heard her draw a deep breath as she walked at my side, and I wondered whither she was taking me. More than once I had motored through Bedfont village on my way to Windsor, or to play golf at the Sunningdale Club, and I knew what a rural old-world place it was.

I was calmly turning over the situation as we walked. The mystery of it all had gripped my senses. I felt the keenest desire to elucidate

the truth of what had really occurred at Gerrard's Cross, and to ascertain what connection the victim had with the pretty girl at my side. It was a fascinating enigma.

I had already promised myself that I would go down to Buckinghamshire, attend the inquest and listen to the evidence. But if I consented to assist my little friend I should assuredly be debarred from so doing.

And yet was I not an idler, a man whose father had left him comfortably off, and who had no reason to heed the cares and worries of life? Would not this little romance prove at least exciting? I loved excitement. For that sole reason I had become a constant traveller, and in any part of Europe where trouble occurred, there I usually endeavoured to be present. I had witnessed the chief pageants, riots, and other popular excitements in Europe for the past ten years or so. I had been in Petersburg and seen the unfortunate people shot down on that memorable "Bloody Sunday." I had seen Warsaw under martial law. At the great strikes in Westphalia and in Lille I had been present, as well as at royal weddings and royal funerals, at the Peace Conference at The Hague, and in Sofia when Prince Ferdinand had asserted his independence.

The special correspondents of the London daily newspapers were, most of them, well known to

me, for I usually arrived on the scene with them, and often had gathered information which I conveyed to them, and saw it later on printed in the columns of one or other of our great journals.

Lillah's request that I should go abroad was therefore not actually unwelcome. It was certainly a suspicious circumstance that she should wish to leave England in secret ; and further, I recollected those curious signs she had exchanged with the black-bearded stranger in the train. Nevertheless, she had, I confess, fascinated me entirely and completely, while her declaration that if I abandoned her she must face death, prompted me, even against my better judgment, to accede at last to her remarkable request.

And when I uttered the words she halted, and, seizing my hand in that sudden impetuous foreign way of hers, raised it to her lips in heartfelt thanks.

" I—I can't thank you enough, Mr. Laird ! " she cried, her voice broken by emotion. " You will save me—you will—you'll let me escape, and let me live ! "

" Hush ! " I urged, for she spoke loudly, and I feared that the person who was so persistently following us, might overhear.

CHAPTER VI

TO THE UNKNOWN BOURNE

WHEN Seddon brought me my tea and newspaper next morning I had already been awake an hour, and had decided upon a course of action.

Eagerly I glanced through the account in the newspaper of the Gerrard's Cross affair, but found no additional fact save that the coroner had fixed his inquiry to be held at the Bull Hotel, at Gerrard's Cross, on the day after next.

This meant that if I intended to be present I must lose no time in getting my neat little companion away.

I had promised Lillah before we had parted in that dark by-road—she to pass through Bedford to Hounslow, and I to return to Feltham—to take her abroad in secret. She had pointed out that to travel by any of the ordinary routes would be impossible, for she might be recognised. Therefore I had found myself in considerable difficulty.

Several roundabout routes to the Continent

which are never watched were known to me. For instance, one may travel from Hull to Malmö by a Wilson steamer, and then cross to Copenhagen and come south to Paris; or again, travel from Leith to Bergen and then south by train to Christiania and Hamburg. Again, there is the General Steam Navigation boat to Bordeaux, several unimportant services from Newcastle across the North Sea, or from Liverpool to Portugal and the Mediterranean. In addition, there is one Channel route which is but little known, namely from Waterloo to Weymouth, and thence by way of the Channel Islands to Cherbourg and Paris.

It was this which I contemplated, but I saw that I could not possibly be in Cherbourg and back again in time for the inquest. Therefore another, and perhaps bolder, suggestion had occurred to me. A friend of mine, Dick Duncan, an idler like myself, who had chambers at the top of St. James's Street, and was an enthusiastic motorist—was also a leading member of the Motor-boat Club, and possessed a fine craft of 120 horse-power in which I had made many a trip down the Crouch from Burnham.

At ten o'clock I was in Duncan's room, where he was still lying in bed. I made pretence that I was about to make a fool of myself and elope with a lady.

"The fact is, old chap, I want you to take me

across to the other side. You can do so easily—if the weather is all right," I said.

"Yes," he replied lazily, "but this time of year it's a bit risky, you know. We might run into a squall."

"I'll risk all that—if you will."

The big, burly, fair-headed fellow looked straight into my face from above the sheet and asked :

"My dear Edgar, why risk your life for a woman? Is she really worth it?"

"Yes," I replied promptly, "she is. You're an old pal, Dick. That's why I've come to you. Where's the boat?"

"Down at Deal."

"Then you could run us over to Calais?" I suggested.

He shook his head, saying :

"No—down to Boulogne perhaps. But I tell you, in winter it's no very great pleasure to run across. I did it several times last summer."

"Well, will you attempt it?"

"Why not go by the mail-boat—much more pleasant, my dear boy. You'll sit hours in wet clothes, and if your lady friend isn't a very good sailor—well, there won't be much romance about it, I can tell you."

I persisted, until, somewhat reluctantly, he agreed to meet me at three o'clock that afternoon at the South Eastern Hotel down at Deal.

"Warn the lady to put on thick clothes and a mackintosh," he said. "I can fit you both out with oilskins. Only if we meet with disaster, my dear Laird, don't blame me—will you?"

"Trust me, old chap!" I cried enthusiastically, and gripping his hand while he still lay in bed. I descended to the taxi-cab awaiting me.

My next call was at a motor-garage in Wardour Street, where I hired a powerful car to take me to Deal, and from whence I rang up the South Eastern Hotel inquiring the state of the weather in the Channel.

"Overcast—but a smooth sea," was the manager's reply.

Then when the car was ready, I first drove back to Savoy Court for my motor-coat, cap, and money, and then set out for Feltham Station, where I had arranged to meet Lillah at half-past eleven.

She was standing some distance along the road, anxiously awaiting me.

When she was seated by my side, and I had told the driver to go as quickly as possible by way of Kingston, Croydon, Westerham, and Maidstone, down to Deal, she asked me, pale and breathless, what was our destination.

I told her, explaining matters, whereupon she gripped my hands in thanks.

"I have, I regret, to return at once when

we've landed you in France," I said. "I must be in London again the day after to-morrow."

Her face fell at my announcement.

"I need only be here for a day. Then I will rejoin you, and we will go into hiding as you desire," I hastened to assure her.

"And you are confident that your friend Mr. Duncan will say nothing of our journey?" she asked anxiously.

"He is my friend. He will remain silent," I declared.

I noted that she was well and warmly clad. She wore a dark green travelling ulster, but was without a mackintosh. This fact I mentioned, but she laughed lightly, assuring me that she was not afraid of the wetting.

"Do you know," she added, "I've been at sea quite a lot, and I've never suffered any inconvenience, not once in all my life."

"Ah, that's good," I exclaimed enthusiastically, "because to most people a cross-Channel voyage in a motor-boat would be a terrible ordeal."

"Nothing is an ordeal when one is desperate, as I am," she declared, with considerable truth.

I felt within myself that I had embarked upon an enterprise full of romance, mystery, and excitement. What would be the result of this endeavour to save the girl under whose influence I had now fallen as one spellbound?

The story I had told Dick Duncan was the only one which, in the circumstances, I could tell, and I knew that by my pretence of elopement I should at once enlist his sympathy.

The day was dull and grey, and the roads through Kent were heavy, but just before four o'clock we pulled up before the hotel at Deal, where Dick in a yachting suit was standing at the door, smoking a cigar awaiting us.

"Well," he said, when I had introduced my companion, "you're most fortunate in the weather. The glass is high and steady, and there'll be nearly a full moon to-night. We can only hope that the wind won't shift."

Then, after having tea together, my big-faced, easy-going friend laughing merrily, and expressing a hope that our future would be full of brightness, we walked down to where the long, grey, sharp-bowed boat lay moored.

From her lockers, Dick produced several sets of yellow oilskins, with sou'-westers, and one of these, specially made with a skirt for a lady, Lillah assumed. Then, when all was ready, Green, his mechanic, let go a rope, and we were soon moving swiftly through the green-grey water, which rose high against our bows as we gathered speed and turned seaward.

The jar of the powerful engines was tremendous, while soon the long ground-swell caused us to rise and fall with a slow regularity which

would have affected most people. Dusk was now creeping on, for already on our right the disappearing sun had left a pale yellow afterglow over Shakespeare's Cliff standing dark and grey.

In the distance there were a couple of steamers bound up Channel, with several brown-sailed Ramsgate smacks, together with the tiny ketches of the "Dealmen," on the look out for vessels requiring pilotage; men who are perhaps the hardest seafarers in all the world.

Dick Duncan in his well-worn oilskins had his attention fixed upon his steering-wheel, and Lillah, seated at my side in the stern, faced the spray without a word.

Once her hand had sought mine involuntarily, as we heeled over, but she had quickly withdrawn it, as though fearing lest her action might be misunderstood. About her only remark was to admire the boat, and express surprise at the rate we were travelling through the water.

It was her first experience of a motor-boat, and she seemed filled with the novelty of the journey.

The weather was clear, but the greyness of evening was now fast falling, and as we got further out we found more wind and white teeth upon the long, swirling waves. Already the lights of Dover Harbour were lit, while straight across our bows we ever and anon saw a slight flash on the grey horizon, which Dick

remarked was the big light at the entrance to Calais Harbour.

"We can't make that," he explained. "The current will take us past Cape Grisnez into Boulogne—with luck"—and he buttoned his old yellow oilskin more tightly at the chin, setting his face to the wind and spray.

Tearing at such a pace the darkening waters rose on each side of our bows as we skimmed over the surface, the swish of the sea ever in our ears. Now and then a wave would strike us, causing the boat to halt for a second and quiver, drenching us with salt spray, then, like some animal infuriated, the boat would again dart forward, her head set towards the ever-flashing light, now growing more distinct in the Channel's darkening gloom.

Green, who had been crouching beside his master out of the spray, presently took a turn at driving, and weird he looked, his head enveloped in a kind of tight-fitting waterproof helmet. At bow and helm we had big acetylene lights burning, throwing long shafts of light far into the grey.

Presently, Dick settled himself at the other side of my pretty little companion, and I saw from his courteousness of manner that he greatly admired her. Indeed, before we started, he had whispered to me that she was uncommonly beautiful.

He had been commenting again upon the state of the weather and consulting his barometer, when, lounging back beneath the big tarpaulin that covered us, he suddenly exclaimed :

" I say, Edgar, did you read that queer case in the papers this morning—the young fellow found near Gerrard's Cross with a cipher message in his pocket ? "

I felt my companion give a quick start, and in the gloom I saw that her countenance was gone pale as death.

" I read something of it," I replied vaguely.

" Murdered, wasn't he, don't you think ? Poor devil ! Fell into the hands of some unscrupulous gang, perhaps. I was speaking to your friend Glendening, of Scotland Yard, whom I met on the platform at Victoria. He says he's certain there's a woman in the affair."

And Lillah, hearing his words, sat rigid, staring straight at the faint recurring light towards which we were so rapidly travelling.

The grey sea around us was, indeed, a sea of despair.

CHAPTER VII

SOME INVESTIGATIONS

IN the long room at the Bull Hotel, at Gerard's Cross, the coroner had opened his court.

Outside, the afternoon was grey, with every sign of a fall of snow. Within, the room was crowded by jurymen, public, and representatives of the Press.

Since I had left Deal in Dick Duncan's motor-boat I had never rested a single moment. Our escape from disaster had indeed been a narrow one, for about two o'clock that morning we had run into a bank of dense fog in mid-Channel, right in the track of the shipping. Steamers' sirens were sounding about us, and once we saw the great black hull of a vessel rise right above us, and a few moments later we were tossing about in the wake of a huge homeward-bound liner.

We shouted, for we had been within an ace of being run down. But on board they apparently could not see it, and so went on. For hours we went slowly, our ears ever strained to catch the

throb of the engines of any vessel in the vicinity. Fortunately the sea was calm, and grew even calmer as, steering by the compass, we slowly approached the French coast.

Then, at daybreak, the fog lifted, and we saw we were close under low white cliffs, which we skirted for fifteen miles or so, until soon after eight o'clock we shot into Boulogne Harbour, arousing some curiosity, I think, among the officers of *douane*. All four of us were half perished with the cold and exposure of the past sixteen hours, but after hot coffee at an obscure and not over-clean little hotel on the Quai Gambetta we had thanked Dick and bidden him farewell.

His intention was to store the boat for a few weeks until warmer weather, and return home by the mail-boat via Folkestone.

As for Lillah and myself, we had no fixed plans. We walked together to the town station, where we entered the buffet, and over some more coffee held consultation.

My suggestion—one which we eventually adopted, was that both of us should purchase some necessaries together with a small valise each, and then travel by train to Etaples. We arrived there about noon, taking up our quarters at a small hotel opposite the station, and writing our names as Mr. Edgar and Miss Rose Laird, of London.

When we had settled, she seemed to quickly recover her good spirits, though full of regret that I had to leave her almost immediately and return to London. This I did at four o'clock that afternoon, promising to go back to her at the earliest moment, and expressing a hope that she would not find the place too dull, for Etaples is very dead in winter when half the houses are closed.

And so, travelling to Calais by a slow train, I crossed by the night service to London, drove to Savoy Court, where I had a shave and a bath, and went on to the inquest upon the unknown.

On alighting at Gerrard's Cross Station I had, quite unexpectedly, run across my friend Miller, of Scotland Yard.

"Hulloa, Meester Laird!" cried the big, burly, grey-moustached man in felt hat and dark grey overcoat, who had travelled by the same train as myself. He spoke with a strong foreign accent, and certainly no one who met him would ever suspect him of being the great international detective that he was.

He gripped my hand in his great paw, and in a cheery voice asked me what I was doing down in that place.

"Well," I said in a low tone of confidence, "I expect my object in coming here is just the same as yours. You know I'm always attracted by mysteries of crime."

"You're like a good many more people, Meester Laird," he laughed; "you have a morbid curiosity—now confess it!"

"I plead guilty," I replied at once. Then, as we walked out of the station together towards the "Bull," I said:

"Tell me frankly, Miller. What do you think of this affair? I daresay you know more about it than I do. I only know what I've read in the papers."

The big man shook his head, his broad face assuming a sphinx-like smile.

"It's a queer case—a very queer case, mind you," he declared, with his accent which most people took to be German. "There are several features in it which betray the foreign hand. That's why the Commissioner has sent me down here—to take charge of the inquiry."

"And have you discovered anything?" I asked, adding, "You know me well enough to be aware that I can keep a secret."

"At present I've discovered nothing. I want to hear the evidence at the inquest before I decide what course to pursue."

"What about that cipher?"

"A woman wrote that—a foreign woman. She was educated in Germany, a fact plain from her handwriting. But here comes the local inspector." And he broke off suddenly.

Half an hour later Miller and I sat side by

side, among the public, he unnoticed and unsuspected, listening to the evidence which was being so carefully written down by the coroner, a grave-faced, rather funereal looking man, who seemed filled with the dignity of office.

He snapped at the witnesses, showed impatience towards the police, and treated the jury as though they were an unnecessary evil. A jurymen had appeared late, and this had apparently upset him.

The body had been viewed, and upon the table in front of the coroner were spread the various articles found in the dead man's pockets, including the piece of grey notepaper with the mysterious cipher traced upon it.

The labourer Wootton, a dull-eyed, sheep-faced man, who had put on his Sunday clothes for the occasion, deposed to finding the body at the edge of the Duke's Wood, whereupon the coroner closely questioned him as to whether he had felt in the dead man's pockets.

"No, sir," was the labourer's reply.

"You're sure you didn't take anything out of the pockets, eh?" he asked. "If you did you'd better say so now, and avoid any further trouble."

"I'm poor, sir," replied the man, his face crimsoning in resentment at such a suggestion. "I'm poor, but I wouldn't rob the dead!"

At this the jury, who knew Wootton to be a respectable, hard-working man, objected to such a question being put.

"I am holding this inquiry, gentlemen," replied the coroner testily. "It is within my discretion to ask what questions I like."

The next witness was a man named George Blyth, whose evidence it may be as well to give just as he himself gave it. He deposed as follows :

"George Blyth, general dealer, Mill End, Rickmansworth. On the evening in question, a little before ten, I had walked across Bulstrode Park to Gerrard's Cross Station, when, about five hundred yards distant from the latter, I passed in the mist a young gentleman accompanied by a lady in a large dark hat and long coat. I nearly ran into them, and halted to beg their pardon. The gentleman laughed, and said something in a foreign language. Then I passed on, while they went into the darkness down the Hedgerley road."

"And you think that the young gentleman was the deceased ?" asked the coroner.

"I'm almost positive of it, sir. The light of the lamp at the corner shone upon the faces of both of them. The lady was young, very pretty, with fair hair. She wore a fine brooch which sparkled in the light. I noticed that particularly."

I held my breath. The description this man had given was that of Lillah !

"And you saw nothing more of them—eh ?" snapped the coroner.

"No sir. I took the next train on to High Wycombe."

Herbert Franklin, assistant schoolmaster at Hedgerley Schools, a thin, consumptive-looking young man, gave evidence which was practically the same as I had already read in the newspapers, save that he corrected the exact time when in the mist he heard the voices of a man and a woman raised in discussion.

"They were not speaking in English, I believe ?" the coroner remarked.

"No, sir. The language was not French nor German, both of which I know."

"Italian—perhaps ?"

"I think not, sir. It was more guttural," the witness replied. "The lady's voice seemed musical and refined. I had only just time for my train, and their affairs were not my business, so I hurried on."

"Was the fog very dense at that point ?" inquired the foreman of the jury.

"Not exactly dense. It was a thick white mist, such as you often have in this neighbourhood on winters' evenings."

"And the spot where they were was outside

the Duke's Wood? Describe exactly at what point you heard them."

"Almost half-way between Fulmer village and the main road, just where the lane skirts the wood, and within fifty yards of where Wootton found the body next morning."

"Apparently," remarked the coroner, "the deceased had walked there from the station with this mysterious lady."

Then, turning to the witness, he asked :

"You were not able to distinguish a single word uttered by either of the pair, Mr. Franklin?"

"No, sir."

The railway porter to whom the deceased had spoken on alighting from the London train, and the police constable alarmed by Wootton, having both made statements, the name—

"Thomas Smith" was shouted loudly by the coroner's officer, and an evil-faced, unkempt, ill-clad man was, a moment later, ushered into the room, causing a dead silence. Everyone was on tiptoe with excitement and curiosity.

CHAPTER VIII

REVEALS THE TRUTH

THE stranger advanced near the coroner's table, cap in hand, looking furtively around. Then, when the oath had been administered, the coroner, with a strange smile upon his face, said :

" You're Thomas Smith, no fixed abode ? "

" Yes, sir," replied the man in a low voice, as though half frightened.

" Now, Smith," he said, " we want you to tell us exactly what you heard and saw. A man lost his life, and you can give us some very important evidence. I may as well explain to the jury at once that on the night in question you were in the Duke's Wood—well—netting a few rabbits that were not your own property—eh ? "

Whereat the whole court laughed.

" Well," the coroner went on, " we'll overlook that little matter for once. You were present at the edge of the wood somewhere about eleven o'clock at night—eh ? "

" Yes, sir," replied the scrubby-bearded man with a grin.

From his dark hair and black eyes I took him to be one of the great Romany tribe of Smith.

He fidgeted with his cap, eyeing the police-sergeant with considerable suspicion.

"Now, tell us what you saw!" urged the coroner, poising his pen in his hand, and looking straight into the poacher's face.

"I—I didn't see much, sir," was his halting reply. "I seed the young man a-standing with the young 'ooman a-talkin'. An' 'e kissed 'er. Sometimes they spoke in English, and sometimes some forrin' language wot I couldn't understand."

"You were close to them?"

"About ten yards away. I'd been a-puttin' down my nets at the edge o' the wood, so naturally I lied low like," and he grinned. "The fog 'ad been pretty bad, but it 'ad cleared off a bit. I watched 'em for about ten minutes. It seemed as though she wor tryin' to persuade 'im to do summat wot 'e didn't want to do. She were a-begging an' a-prayin' to 'im, but he only laughed in 'er face. When, while they were a-talkin' in German or somethin', 'e suddenly got excited at summat she said, an' threw 'is 'ands about wildly. She tried to pacify 'im, but he turned round fiercely, an' seemed to blackguard 'er. I 'eard 'er say in English, 'This is cruel of you, Paul—cruel that you should utter such lies against me!' 'Is reply was all double Dutch to

me. But presently I saw 'er suddenly put 'er arm round 'is neck lovin'-like, as though she wanted to kiss 'im. Then in a moment he seemed to faint an' collapse, an' he staggered an' fell forra'd on 'is face. That's all I know, sir."

"You didn't approach the pair?" inquired the coroner.

"No, sir. The girl hurried away, an' I heard 'er footsteps quite a long way off. I thought the young gent 'ad fainted, an' crept forra'd to have a look through 'is pockets, but sommat seemed to tell me that I'd better get out o' the way. So I took up my nets and went away to yon side o' the wood."

"You didn't see this lady strike any blow, I suppose?" asked the coroner.

"No, sir. She simply put 'er arms around 'im in a lovin' kind o' way, an' in a few seconds 'e reeled and fell down just like a log."

"And the lady made her escape at once?"

"Yes, sir. She didn't even bend down to look at 'im," replied the witness. "It was just as though she'd killed 'im, an' wor eager to get away."

"But you saw no blow struck?"

"No, sir. I tell you she only put 'er arm round his neck."

"Well, that wouldn't have killed him, I suppose?" remarked the coroner with a smile.

"I dunno, sir. You asked me what I saw, an' I've told you."

"Everything?"

"Yes, sir, everything," was the man's reply. "If I'd ha' 'ad any idea that the poor young man wor dead, I'd ha' gone over an' 'ad a look at 'im."

"You mean," remarked the coroner, "that you'd have probably had a look at what was in his pockets."

At this the witness grinned, and a titter of laughter ran through the room.

"Just describe the embrace a little more fully," said the foreman of the jury, who was a butcher in Gerrard's Cross.

"Well, sir," exclaimed the witness. "It was just a hug round the neck like wot most girls give the fellers they loves—a sudden, impetuous hug."

"Then he might have fainted—I mean, death might have been due to natural causes," remarked the foreman.

"The medical evidence will show that," interposed the coroner. "Any further questions of this witness?"

As there were none, the man Smith, who had been an actual eye-witness of the curious affair, was told that his examination was at an end, and with relief he shuffled over to a vacant seat against the wall.

The two local doctors were then called, one after the other, but their evidence was not very convincing. They both admitted that the symptoms were puzzling, and were evidently reluctant to express any opinion, in view of the evidence of a much greater authority which was about to be given, and which those in court were anxiously expecting.

Presently the name "Sir Edward Mason" was called, and there entered a spruce, clever, sharp-eyed man, who took the oath with a business-like air, and briefly described his high medical qualifications.

"You have been called in to make an independent *post-mortem* on the deceased, I believe, Sir Edward?" asked the coroner. "Will you kindly tell us your conclusions."

"Well—to put it plainly, this is undoubtedly a case of deliberate murder—murder by a most ingenious, I may say most up-to-date, method. After the two medical witnesses had concluded their examination I was called from London by the police, and made a very careful and exhaustive investigation."

"And what did you find?"

"The deceased was aged about twenty-eight to thirty, rather muscular, and, as far as I could ascertain, perfectly healthy. In the left forearm was the old scar of a bullet, while on the right shoulder was tattooed a rough design like a dog's

head—a collie, it seemed to be. I could find no trace of organic disease, and nothing to account for death from natural causes. My opinion is that death was due to some virulent irritant poison not self-administered. The symptoms I found were very peculiar, and such as I have never before observed. The gums had turned black, and the palms of the hands were also darkened, while the fingers were tightly clenched, showing that the unfortunate man had expired in great agony.”

“Then the deceased was, in your opinion, poisoned?” remarked the coroner, looking up from his notes.

“Yes—but poisoned in some manner which is, to me, a complete mystery.”

“Have you any idea of the nature of the poison?”

“I have made several analyses, but they are not yet all complete,” replied the great doctor.

“I have no doubt I shall decide what poison was administered, but how it was administered is quite another question. It was some compound which must have taken deadly effect almost immediately. Several of these were known to the ancients, and especially to the Council of Ten of Venice, who used them to remove undesirable persons. It may have been one of these, for aught we know.”

“Then the mode of death is an enigma?”

"Absolutely. The poison was not swallowed, for I found no traces of it in the stomach. Therefore, it was certainly not a case of suicide. No, the young man was done to death by a master assassin who probably took advantage of the latest scientific or chemical discovery. There have been vague stories, I hear, about a woman being seen in the deceased's company, and consequently suspicion has been thrown upon her. Personally, however, I'm inclined to think that the assassination could not have been committed by a woman."

"We have already had evidence of a woman being seen with the deceased, up to the very moment that he fell dying, Sir Edward," the coroner said. "Before you were called a poacher deposed to seeing the pair together."

"The evidence of other witnesses does not concern me," the great doctor replied calmly. "I only tell you my discoveries, and the theory I have formed—that the deceased met his death by poison administered by some cruel and secret method."

"How?"

Sir Edward Mason shrugged his shoulders, and after a pause replied:

"There is not the slightest evidence to show how the poison was introduced into the system. One thing seems quite clear—that he did not commit suicide. It was very plainly a case of

murder. When we ascertain the actual poison used, it will then perhaps be easier to form some theory as to the manner in which it might have been administered. But one thing is proved, namely, that the criminal was a master-hand."

"What causes you to think that, Sir Edward?"

"Because of the absence of any trace of the manner in which the deleterious drug was administered," replied the elderly well-set-up man, who was one of the greatest authorities on poisons, and whose works upon the subject were recognised as standard ones.

"Then beyond the fact which you have ascertained that this unknown man called Paul actually died of poison, you cannot tell us anything further?" asked the coroner.

"I regret I cannot. At present, I cannot yet decide what was the poison used. It was a very virulent one, and being by some means introduced into the blood instantly affected the heart. The man probably expired without uttering a word."

"The deceased could not have been killed by the woman simply placing her arm round his neck, I suppose?"

"Impossible. Fatal dislocation could not be effected in such a manner."

"Not if the woman used some trick of *ju-jitsu*?" asked the foreman of the jury.

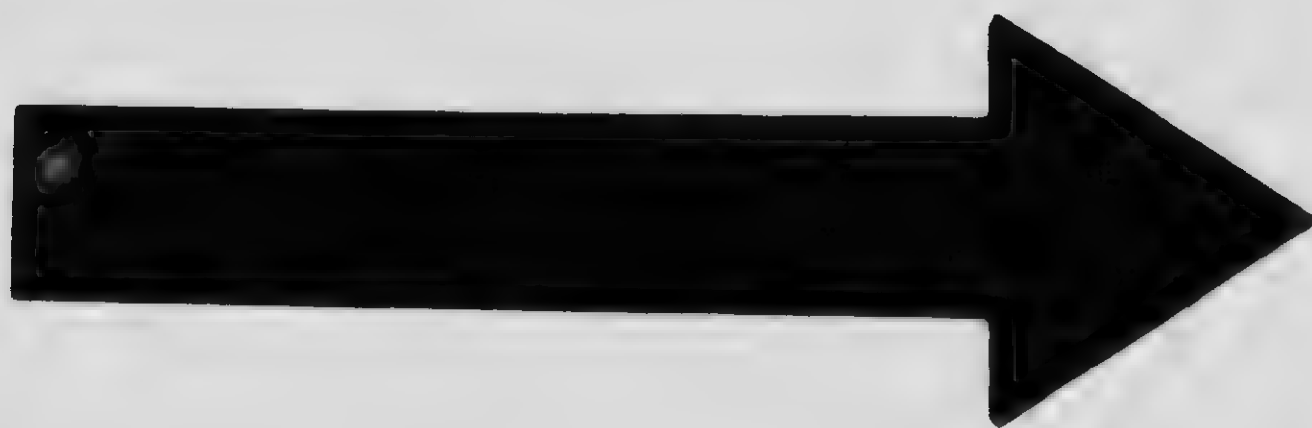
"I should say not," replied Sir Edward blandly.

The great doctor left the table, and took a seat near the coroner, while a low buzz of conversation went round the room. It was patent to everyone, after the poacher's evidence, that the mysterious woman had met her companion, and by means unexplained had killed him. There was no wound, no puncture of any sort, Sir Edward had declared. The way in which the victim had been killed was a complete enigma.

Miller, seated at my side, unknown to any in the room except the police and myself, listened to the evidence very intently.

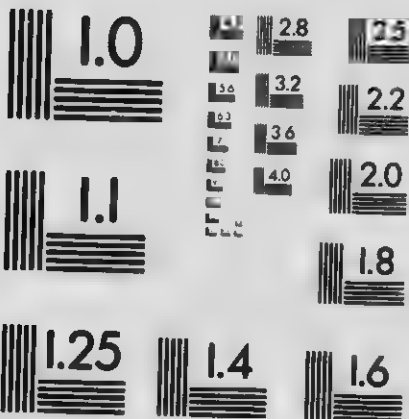
Suddenly there was further excitement among the public and the Press, for the station-master at Gerrard's Cross was called, and deposed that by the 8.40 p.m. train on the night in question a young lady alighted from the Great Central train from Marylebone, gave up the half of a first-class return ticket and hurried out of the station. His description of her exactly coincided with that of the poacher, Smith, except in a slight and unimportant detail regarding her hat.

Then the coroner made a somewhat pompous speech to the jury, suggesting that the inquiry should be adjourned for a fortnight to enable the police to prosecute their inquiries. It was, he pointed out, quite within their power, of course, to arrive at a verdict that day, but in



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face of Sir Edward Mason's evidence, he felt personally that there should be an adjournment.

The jury were not, however, unanimously of that opinion. To some of the jurymen the loss of another's day work was a serious matter; therefore they retired, and, disregarding the coroner's suggestion, they returned into court, when the foreman said:

"We've arrived at a unanimous verdict, Mr. Coroner—that of 'wilful murder.'"

"Of course," he replied. "That was the only conclusion you could have arrived at, gentlemen. We can only hope that the police will be successful in both identifying the unfortunate young man and in arresting the assassin."

Then, as I walked with the detective Miller back to the station, he replied in answer to my question:

"We must find that woman, Meester Laird. She killed him—without a doubt."

"You accept the evidence of that poacher, Smith?" I asked.

"In a case such as this we get whatever evidence we can," was his reply. "I see no reason to doubt his story. Since I've been here, I have discovered the victim's nationality."

"How?" I asked quickly.

"Never mind how. He was Italian."

"And the woman?"

"Ah!" he replied. "When I find her, then

we shall ascertain a good deal. Fortunately we have a very fair description, and, curiously enough, it tallies with that of a very pretty girl, a foreigner, who is living just outside London with her father—members of a very clever and dangerous gang of international criminals. If my surmise be correct, that murder was committed in order to close the young man's mouth."

"And the woman you suspect from the description. What is she like?" I inquired hoarsely.

"A face like an angel, but the heart of a devil," he said. "She plays the decoy for the gang, and many a great *coup* has she made by a pretence of loving the unsuspecting victim. Their daring exploits have been carried out in nearly every capital in Europe, and when I find this interesting young lady you will probably be surprised at the revelations I shall make in court. The career of the gang of which she is a member is absolutely amazing."

"And do you expect to discover her?" I asked breathlessly.

"Yes, Meester Laird," answered my friend. "I shall find her sooner or later—never fear."

CHAPTER IX

MR. PONTIFEX AGAIN

MULLER, or Miller as he was now known, was a born detective. His earlier days had been spent in Hamburg as a police-agent, but twenty years ago he had taken service at Scotland Yard and had been sent to Dover to watch the Continental traffic. For a couple of years or so he had been a frequent passenger in the Channel boats, and picked up a great deal of information which afterwards proved of considerable assistance to the authorities. He was afterwards stationed at Havre, Cherbourg, and Bremerhaven. When recalled to Scotland Yard his knowledge of French and German made him very useful in extradition cases. He was raised to the rank of inspector, and in addition to effecting many arrests in England he had been engaged many times in important inquiries on the Continent.

He was now looking for a woman whom he already knew, and I was too well aware that as he had prophesied, he would find her sooner or later.

As I sat opposite the big, burly, grey-moustached man I could not help recalling his words. He had declared to me that Lillah, the mysterious girl whom I was secretly assisting to escape, had a face like an angel, but the heart of a devil. How had he discovered that the victim's nationality was Italian? How did he know that Lillah was a member of a criminal gang?

We were alone in the compartment. After a long silence I broached the subject nearest my heart.

"Tell me, Miller," I said, "by what means have you fixed the identity of the assassin?"

"I have formed certain conclusions," was his vague reply, "conclusions of my own, Meester Laird. The description is exact of a girl whom we have known for a considerable time. Her father is one of the shrewdest and most dangerous criminals in Europe. It was he and his interesting friends who committed that great fraud on the Marseilles branch of the Credit Lyonnais, by which they netted nearly a quarter of a million francs. The French police tried to bring it home to them, but there was not sufficient evidence. Almond was too clever for them."

"Then the man's name is Almond—eh?" I said quickly.

"Yes—Jim Almond. He's been in London lately with his girl. I saw them both about

three weeks ago, driving in a taxi up Bond Street. Next day I had an inquiry regarding them from the French police."

"You don't know the victim, I suppose?" I asked, recollecting the similarity of the names Almond and Ashcroft.

"No. He's somebody who stood in their way and threatened to inform, perhaps. Jim Almond and his crowd are a queer lot, I can tell you. If half what is said about them be true, they all ought to be hanged."

"The Credit Lyonnais affair was a wonderfully planned *coup*. I recollect reading about it at the time."

"Yes. They left no trace behind. Almond's girl is believed to have been at the bottom of it all. She got in with one of the cashiers, who was afterwards found dead on the rocks near Toulon. Suicide—it was said."

"Then she's a somewhat unscrupulous young person—eh?"

"Yes," he laughed. "Iris Almond's appearance is rather deceptive, as some people have found to their cost."

"But the cipher?" I said. "Have you any idea to what it refers?"

"No, except that it undoubtedly contains an appointment—the appointment which the unfortunate young Italian kept, and which proved fatal to him. He was led into a trap, and if

the evidence be reliable the trap was set by the girl I've just been speaking about."

"You've tried to read the cipher?"

"Of course. Half a dozen men at the Yard have puzzled for hours over it, but haven't yet made it out. It's one of those preconcerted codes impossible to read without knowledge of the key. That's my belief."

"What does 'The Black Three' mean?"

"Some of Jim Almond's devilment, no doubt," replied the Pole, with his pronounced accent.

My own position was, I was compelled to admit within myself, a very curious one. Yet while I seemed friendly with Miller I should certainly be able to defeat his inquiry. He had evidently no idea that Iris Almond was already on the Continent.

"I suppose," I said at last, in order to test his knowledge, "that by this time Almond and his daughter are out of England?"

"No," was his reply. "I've had the Channel ports watched for nearly a fortnight past at the request of the French police, and they have not gone abroad."

A great weight was lifted from my mind by those words, yet was not my neat-waisted little friend in France, the country wherein danger lay for her!

She was anxiously awaiting me in that deserted hotel at Etaples, passing as Rose Laird,

my sister. I recollected her face when Dick Duncan had unsuspectingly referred to the mystery. And I also recollected all that she had told me.

"It seems curious," I remarked presently, "that Sir Edward Mason is unable to say how that young man Paul died."

"He died of poison."

"I accept that. But nowadays toxicologists can ascertain how the poison is introduced into the system. There is no puncture of any sort."

"Nothing visible," the great detective said. "Sir Edward is one of the greatest authorities, and I accept what he says without question."

We analysed the evidence of the poacher, of the schoolmaster, and of the railway porter, until at last we ran into the dull London haze of the London terminus, where, parting from my friend, I took a taxi with all haste back to Savoy Court.

Even as I passed the newsvendors' shops I saw that contents bills of the evening papers bore the words: "Gerrard's Cross Mystery: Inquest and Verdict." The evening press, living as it does upon the latest sensation, loses no time in serving up the latest dish to its eager patrons.

For the first time, as I drove along, I recalled those silent footsteps which had followed us in

the darkness between Feltham and Bedfont. Were they the steps of an enemy or of a friend? Was it possible that one of Miller's assistants had traced my fair-haired little companion, and was, even at that moment, keeping observation upon her?

When I re-entered my rooms Seddon stepped forward, saying:

"Mr. Pontifex is waiting to see you, sir."

"Mr. Pontifex!" I echoed, and placing down my hat I entered my sitting-room, where the stout, thick-lipped stranger rose to greet me. His appearance was the same as when he had called upon me on that well-remembered morning after my first meeting with Lillah Ashcroft.

Again he was profuse in his apologies for disturbing me.

"I wished, Mr. Laird, to speak to you rather than write," he said. "That is why I have taken the liberty of waiting until your return."

"I hope you haven't waited long," I said.

"My time is not very precious," he laughed lightly. "I am, perhaps unfortunately for myself, an idler."

If he was an idler he was at the same time a mystery. Was he one of Jim Almond's friends, those clever unscrupulous international thieves who were constantly outwitting the police of Europe? Did the photograph of the flat-nosed, round-faced man repose in one of those big

albums I had seen in Miller's room at New Scotland Yard?

"I'm sorry I was out," I said, motioning him again to his chair, and closing the door.

When he saw that we were alone he bent forward, and looking straight into my face, said:

"You have been to the inquest on the young Italian, Mr. Laird. What theory have you formed?"

"I—well, I have none," I replied with hesitancy.

He drew a copy of an evening paper from his pocket, and began to criticise the evidence.

"Do you object, then, to the verdict given by the jury?" I asked at last, for his manner irritated me. Besides, it was not clear why he had called upon me.

"Not at all. It was the only verdict that could be given in the circumstances. The affair is a mystery—and mysteries of crime are my hobby. I frequently set myself to solve them."

"Then I hope, Mr. Pontifex, you will be able to solve this," I remarked meaningly.

"I do not think that in this case the victim was murdered. There was no motive."

"How can you possibly tell?" I asked quickly, looking straight into his dark protruding eyes.

"I mean that as far as can be seen there was no motive," he faltered, correcting himself.

"According to the evidence, a young girl was seen to throw her arms around his neck, whereupon he suddenly fell and expired. A most absurd story, I think. How the jury could have accepted it I can't imagine. You were in court, I suppose?"

I nodded in the affirmative.

"And how did it strike you?"

"Well—as rather unconvincing."

"Especially as the doctors could say nothing definite."

"Then what is your theory?"

"Sudden death—from natural causes," answered Mr. Pontifex. "That's my firm opinion."

"And the cipher?"

"A lover's message, most probably."

I remained silent. Why had this man, the trusted friend of Lillah Ashcroft's, said to be Iris Almond, come to me to expound that theory? He had some hidden motive, but what it was was not at all plain. I held the fellow in distinct dislike. Yet was it not through him that I had again met the charming sweet-faced girl whom Miller suspected of being a murderess?

"Well," I said slowly, when I had offered him a cigarette and taken one myself, "it was not to speak of the affair at Gerrard's Cross that you came here, Mr. Pontifex. What is your real business with me?"

For a second, a dark shadow crossed his brow.

I felt confident that he was one of the clever associates of the man Almond, and was consequently on my guard against him.

"The truth is, Mr. Laird," answered the stout, prosperous-looking man, "I have called with a message from Miss Ashcroft. She sent me a telegram to-day asking me to call upon you."

"Why did she not telegraph to me direct?" I queried with some suspicion.

"Well—I suppose she thought it wisest not to allow the telegraph people to have any knowledge of her message. She 'wired' to me in code, saying that she was leaving Etaples at once, and that I was to call and tell you that as 'Miss Rose Laird' she has gone to the Hotel Angst at Bordighera, where she is taking a suite of rooms for her 'brother'—yourself."

"Then you know that I have consented to allow her to pass as my 'sister'?" I said sharply, still with some surprise.

"Yes. And I assure you that her father greatly appreciates your kind efforts to protect her from her enemies."

"Her enemies? Who are they?"

"I am her friend, Mr. Laird, but I am myself unaware of the identity of her enemies, save that they are secret yet powerful ones. You can save her from suicide—or worse—if you will, and I, who have known her since she was a little child in arms, beg of you to continue your efforts,"

he said, in a deep, earnest voice. He was pleading for her as though for himself.

"I have already given Miss Ashcroft my promise," I replied. "There is scarcely need to repeat it."

"And you will regard my visit here as confidential, will you not?" he urged.

"For what reason?"

"For a number of reasons, Mr. Laird—reasons that at present I need not state. You have shown friendship to Miss Ashcroft and to myself. And depend upon it you will not find us ungrateful. One day," he added, in a deep voice, "you may require a friend, and on that day you will, I assure you, not find Philip Pontifex fail you."

The man spoke strangely. I sat staring at him in silence, wondering what hidden meaning those words of his contained.

CHAPTER X

LILLAH SPEAKS FRANKLY

“**A**H! my dear Edgar! I hope you’ve had a good journey from London! I expected you all day yesterday.”

Lillah met me in the big red-carpeted hall of the Angst Hotel, at Bordighera, that great white many-windowed place which lies back from the blue Mediterranean amid its gardens of oranges, roses and fine spreading palms, its position the most secluded and sheltered of any along the Italian Riviera.

She was wearing a cream serge skirt and cream silk blouse with a slight touch of turquoise blue, indeed a sweet and dainty and altogether charming figure.

Three o’clock in the afternoon. I had just alighted from the hotel omnibus which had brought me, with several other visitors and much baggage from the station. Those who go on the Riviera to escape the wet and fogs of our dear, old, much-maligned England, take with them quantities of baggage, hence our bus was overladen.

I had left Charing Cross on a dark wet day, when London looked its gloomiest and saddest, yet here was a cloudless sky, bright sunshine, and the odour of carnations and violets everywhere, a change indeed from the mud and hustle of the Strand.

Lillah was playing her part well.

Before the gold-braided hall-porter, the waiters, and the urbane Italian who was *chef de reception* of the hotel, she greeted me with all the affection of a sister, saying :

"I've got a suite on the first floor, Edgar. I hope you'll like it. If not, there's another on the second. Come and see."

I ascended with her in the lift, and could not help laughing within myself at the extreme humour of the situation. All I feared was that there might be someone in the hotel whom I knew, some fellow from the club perhaps, who would be aware that I did not possess a sister. Hence I was anxious to scan the list of visitors.

The suite we entered was a large and pleasant one, a pretty yellow and gilt sitting-room, with my own room, a room for my "sister," and one for the young, dark-eyed, Italian woman whom she had apparently engaged as maid, and whom she addressed as Annetta.

She spoke to her in Italian, a language with which I was fortunately fairly well acquainted.

I filled up the slip the waiter placed before me—the police requirements of age, domicile, and profession—and then, when the man had gone, my little companion, laughing mischievously, said :

“ This new maid of mine doesn’t understand a word of English, so we can talk. I was obliged to leave Etaples, for I fancied I was suspected. I telegraphed to Mr. Pontifex, and he called upon you, I suppose.”

She was standing near the window, where beyond lay a delightful view of feathery palms, orange trees in blossom, red-roofed villas, and the unruffled sapphire sea beyond. “ Yes,” I said, “ I was surprised that you did not communicate direct with me.”

“ It was dangerous. So I ‘wired’ to Mr. Pontifex.”

“ Yes,” she answered abruptly, lowering her eyes for a second. “ Had I ‘wired’ to you the post office in Etaples would have known all my business. But have you ever been here in Bordighera before ? ”

“ Once only, about three years ago. I much prefer it to San Remo, it’s quieter and more select. Here, the people are mostly respectable, but in San Remo one meets a mixed and altogether undesirable class—a class who are debarred even from Monte Carlo. The wonder to me is that respectable English men and women

dare to take their daughters to such a place as San Remo."

"So I hear," she replied. "I drove over there the day before yesterday with Annetta, and found it a rather uninteresting place."

"Yes, and about as unhealthy and insanitary as Nice was a dozen years ago. They're always having epidemics of typhoid and other diseases in San Remo, but the authorities carefully hush them up, afraid of losing the patronage of visitors."

"That's surely wicked!"

"Only what's done by the municipalities of a hundred other health resorts. They juggle with the registrar's figures until some of them pretend to have no death-rate at all!"

She laughed merrily. Then I glanced around the room.

I saw in the centre of the table a big bowl of fresh roses, placed there by her own hand. Was that the same hand, that slim white right hand that rested upon the back of the chair with the fine diamond ring glittering upon it, that had so cruelly struck down the man whose identity was, as yet, unestablished, and who was known as "Paul"?

Could it be possible that my sweet-faced little companion was the actually unscrupulous Iris Almond, whose career had been so darkly hinted at by Miller?

I could not believe it. Nay, I refused to credit it. I, man-of-the-world that I was, surely knew a criminal when I saw one! Or at least I believed I did.

How deceiving are appearances! There are women with the faces of angels, yet with hearts of hell, men with open honest countenances full of trust and uprightness, yet at heart unprincipled, shifty, and unscrupulous. Yes, among us every day walk men like Ezzelin, whose melancholy could only be cured by the spectacle of death, and who had a passion for red blood, as other men have for red wine—the son of the Fiend, as was reported, and one who had cheated his father at dice when gambling with him for his own soul.

I descended to the hall, and there eagerly scanned the list of visitors, finding to my great relief that there was nobody who knew me intimately.

A City man named Kay-McIntyre, who had bought a baronetcy as a birthday present for his wife, was the only visitor I knew personally, and he had no knowledge of my relatives.

Therefore, at present I was safe.

Returning to our sitting-room, we sat at tea together, and I became fascinated by the extreme culture and grace of my little friend.

She was discussing Italian art and Italian poetry, comparing the art of Raphael with that

of the modern Venetian school, and the poetry of Dante with that of Carducci and d'Annunzio.

And as I listened, teacup in hand, I fell to wondering whether from Pontifex she had learned the real reason of my return to England, mainly to be present at the inquiry at Gerrard's Cross.

Her motive in crossing the frontier into Italy was quite plain. She feared to remain in France after the affair at Marseilles. Her father was also on the Continent, she had told me.

Where was he ?

I found myself laughing secretly at Miller's ignorance. What would he think had he known that the woman—the terrible woman of whom he was in search—was concealing her identity by living as my sister, the sister of a respectable Englishman. But was she the same person ?

If I took Miller's story to be the correct one, Jim Almond, bank-robber and jewel thief, had parted company with his pretty daughter, temporarily, no doubt. They were sheltering until the storm blew over.

But the girl before me had seemed somehow to exert over me a fatal fascination ever since the first moment we met in the restaurant car of the Scotch express. She possessed a *chic*, an innate smartness, combined with modesty, that I had never noticed in other girls, though in the course

of my life I had known, and—well—I had loved, as every man loves.

As the sunlight mellowed, and the delicate purple of evening tinted the calm southern sea, she sat with the pink afterglow falling upon her fair hair, and lighting up a face that no argument would ever cause me to believe to be the face of a murderess. She spoke in her soft, sweet musical voice words of deep and heartfelt thanks.

She drew a long breath. Her breast slowly rose and fell. I saw that her gaze was fixed blankly upon the distant horizon.

"I really don't know, Mr. Laird, what you must think of me! To you I must seem a complete mystery. I—I can only thank you—thank you as only a desperate woman can—for your kindness towards me in thus shielding me from my enemies," she said. "I am a stranger. I have no claim whatever upon you—I—I'm a woman whose code of honour is not what it should be, and whose past perhaps will—well, will not bear investigation. Yet you have taken compassion upon me, and have stood by me as a friend. You, Mr. Laird, are my only friend," she added in a hoarse voice, broken by emotion. "My one and only real friend."

I had watched her countenance, and saw that the words she uttered came direct from her troubled heart. She was truly and genuinely

thankful that I had acted as she requested, and that for the present at least she was safe.

"I promised to be your friend, Miss Ashcroft," I said briefly. "And I hope always to remain such."

"Ah!" she cried, "you do not know what great service you have rendered me. You can never know, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless disaster befalls me after all," she added in a hard, changed voice. "Sometimes, do you know, I sit here and think. And then I feel somehow as though my past will rise against me, and that to the world I shall be held up as an example of a woman who is thoroughly heartless and bad. I know I'm not like other women, Mr. Laird. To you I make no pretence of sanctity," she went on, speaking with quick agitation. "You, my good friend, I do not seek to mislead! I am what my father and his friends have made me—an adventuress."

"Your father?" I echoed, in pretence of ignorance. She had condemned herself. She was Iris Almond. "Has your father compelled you then to do something against your will?"

She nodded, but her overburdened heart seemed too full to articulate words. Her self-denunciation was strange, to say the least. It really seemed as though her intention was to confess the truth to me, yet she feared the con-

sequences, she feared lest I might turn from her in disgust and loathing.

For fully ten minutes there was silence between us.

She had risen from the little tea-table, and stood gazing out upon the brilliant sunset. I, on my part, had turned, and was standing upon the hearthrug before the blazing logs.

Suddenly, as though resolved, she walked across to me, and halting, her pointed chin bent upon her breast, as though in shame, she said :

" Mr. Laird, I—I want to say something. I hardly know how to say it—more especially to you. But first, tell me will you forgive me if I speak ? "

" Why, most certainly, Miss Ashcroft," I said, rather surprised at her sudden change of manner.

" Are we not firm friends ? You may surely repose any confidence in me. I can assure you it will not be abused."

" Then what I want to say is—is this—oh ! you won't think ill of me for saying it—will you ? "

" I promise you I will not," was my quiet response.

" Then I want to ask you one favour—a strange favour surely for a woman to ask a man ! " she said. " I want you to promise me faithfully that you will never allow yourself to become attracted by what some men have declared to be my manner. A woman always

knows when she is admired, recollect, and I know that you admire me. Perhaps my face may have induced you to declare yourself my friend. It may be so. But whatever it is, regard me, I earnestly beg of you, only as you would a man friend, one who in return for your generosity will be devoted to you and to your interests."

I did not answer for a moment. Hers was indeed a curious request.

"You mean that you forbid me to flirt with you—eh, Miss Prim?" I laughed.

"I mean, Mr. Laird, that you must abandon any admiration that you may entertain for me," she declared very gravely. "If we are to be real friends, we must be only friends. Will you agree?"

The dainty girl, who held me in such fascination, had read my heart like a book.

"Why do you ask that, Miss Ashcroft?" I exclaimed. "Can you never love?" I blurted forth, for I was always a blunderer.

"I—I loved once!" she answered hoarsely, and next second, covering her face with her white hands, as though to shut up a tragic memory, she burst into a torrent of tears.

That question of mine had opened flood-gates of her pent-up emotions. The bitter reflection showed a heart broken by grief and remorse—perhaps by guilt.

And I stood by in silence, pained and wondering.

CHAPTER XI

THE DESOLATION OF THE SOUL

THE bright sunny winter days were indeed pleasant and exhilarating along that broken palm-lined coast. The sky was cloudless, the sea deep sapphire, the air perfumed with orange blossom and with violets. Away from the racket, the recklessness, and garish glamour of Monte Carlo, Bordighera is quiet, peaceful, and eminently respectable. In those great white villas reside many members of the British aristocracy, while the hotels are patronised by those who go south for health and comfort.

Women do not strut in Paris gowns as they do on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice, and men have no temptation to hazard five-franc pieces or golden louis on the green tables. The little place, clean and prosperous, is unobtrusive, and, by the average visitor who goes on the Riviera in search of pleasure, is voted "a dull hole."

Certainly entertainments are few. Tea-drinking and gossip at the villas, or in the halls of the

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hotels, with now and then a tennis tournament or a dance, is the limit of dissipation, yet the quiet folk who are its patrons are an early-to-bed lot, and the little town remains quite unique in its sun-blached tranquillity.

As day followed day I idled in the hotel garden or walked or drove with Lillah, compelled to sustain the often amusing fiction of her being my sister. One brilliant morning we hired a motor-car, and spent the day in a delightful excursion, travelling up the lovely Roya valley from Ventimiglia to the French frontier, and joining the great military road, afterwards ascended through the high snow-clad Alps to the Col di Tenda, passing through the long tunnel which pierces the mountain, and travelling out again northward into Italy, as far as Cuneo. The run is one of the most picturesque in Europe, and we both thoroughly enjoyed the magnificent mountain scenery; and being much interested in the strong fortifications, and the great numbers of frontier guards, both French and Italian, that we met everywhere: for that boundary is perhaps one of the most zealously guarded in the world.

A week of idleness and subterfuge had already passed, yet I had not referred to that strange request my companion had made. She had compelled me to make a promise, and I had done so in order to afford her satisfaction.

Her identity seemed absolutely proved, however. From the remarks that from time to time fell from her lips, I had now no doubt whatever that she was really Iris Almond, the woman of whom Miller, as well as the French police, was in active search.

More than once I reflected upon my own unpleasant position if she were arrested. In all probability I, too, would be arrested on suspicion of complicity in her various offences. The police of France and Italy are less careful than our own. Once within an Italian prison cell on suspicion one has to exercise considerable patience and suffer considerable indignity.

I had vivid recollection of a friend of mine when passing that frontier at Ventimiglia with me late one night going to buy a ticket for Rome. In the money he presented was found a spurious five-franc piece, one of those coins so often palmed off upon the Britisher by French café-waiters. My friend, a well-known barrister in the Temple, was arrested, and being searched by the Italian commissary of police at Ventimiglia station a second false five-franc piece was found in his pocket. They would hear no explanation, and he was detained in custody a whole week on suspicion of being a counterfeit coiner. Indeed not until urgent representations were made by the British Consul and by our Ambassador at Rome was my unfortunate friend released.

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Truly his holiday experience was a decidedly unpleasant one!

I dreaded hourly lest I should meet anyone I knew.

What would my friends say, I wondered, if I fell into the hands of the police in company with the notorious Mademoiselle Iris!

Often as I sat before her in our little *salon*, or lounged at her side in the smart victoria in which we drove daily into the country, I glanced furtively at those wonderfully perfect features of hers. Surely, that could not be the face of the heartless woman at whose dark deeds my friend Miller had hinted!

Sight of a couple of carabineers or of an agent of police always caused a sharp twinge to run through my heart. At moments when in our conversation I would fain forget the cloud which hung upon her, the very sight of those men in uniform caused me to reflect.

One warm afternoon we had driven along the white, winding sea-road through Ospedaletti, with its closed Casino, through gaudy San Remo, and on until we suddenly turned inland at Taggia, with its violet and carnation fields, through the grey-green olives, the dusty aloes, bright orange trees, and feathery palms, until, after a painful ascent, we found ourselves in one of the most quaint and curious places in Europe—the little rock village of old Bussana.

Not a soul was in the whole place. We walked its deserted old-world streets, and entered its deserted houses, but there was not a sound, and for a good reason. The place years ago had been wrecked by a terrible earthquake. Hundreds still lie beneath those fallen walls, but the survivors, who fled in panic in the night, have built for themselves an ugly village called "new" Bussana, far below towards the sea.

We had left the carriage on the road outside the village, for the steep winding streets were blocked by debris. The sun shone brightly upon those grey, grim ruined walls, and the birds, the only denizens of the place, flew about chattering as we disturbed them.

Presently we came to the church. The campanile, badly cracked and tottering, still stood, but the roof had fallen in. Upon the altar open to the sky a vase still stood with faded and dirty paper flowers fluttering in the soft wind, and as we clambered over the debris we saw how terrible had been the disaster. From that sacred building nothing had been taken. A weather-beaten picture of the Madonna still hung over the altar, its gilt frame now black with exposure, and the canvas, grey and rotten, had fallen away at one corner, and flapped mournfully in the wind. The scene was one of complete and striking desolation.

Fatigued by the ascent, she sat upon a column

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of stone that had fallen across the interior, silent as she had been all day. More than once that morning I had fancied that in her I had detected an unusual nervousness. She seemed to have lost her usual lightness of heart.

And as we sat there I laughingly referred to her apparent thoughtfulness.

"Yes," she sighed. "But I really didn't know that my manner had changed. It ought not—to you, Mr. Laird," she declared, with a faint smile. "But the fact is I—well, I fear that I am becoming too great a burden upon you. You are fettered here; you cannot move, because of me."

"Why, don't be so foolish, Miss Lillah!" I cried. "I have nothing particular to do, and it is much more pleasant here on the Riviera than in London."

"Yes, but you are unable to go over to Monte Carlo; unable to call upon any of your friends. You have to lead the life of a hermit, all because of me!" she replied.

I could see how troubled she was on my account. She had asked me more than once to go to Nice, to Cannes, and to Monte Carlo, where I had many friends wintering. But I steadily refused, because I knew quite well that those friends, many of whom had their own cars there, would "look me up" in return. If they did, what explanation could I give of my "sister"?

True, I spent as little time in her company at the hotel as I could. We ate our meals in the big *table d'hôte* room—except our tea—in preference to having them served in our *salon*, and fortunately Lillah had come across several women staying there, with whom she spent a considerable portion of her time. It was, of course, perfectly true what she had said. The fulfilment of my promise was rapidly becoming a serious task, which might end only in discovery, and consequent unpleasant exposure.

This woman, denounced as an adventuress, was, strangely enough, so sweet, modest, and high-minded that nowadays it never seemed to dawn upon her that we were transgressing the law of the *convenances*. I had never even kissed her hand.

Each morning she took my hand in greeting; each evening she took my hand on parting. Twice a day I bowed over it, and twice a day she laughed merrily as I did so. Yes, the situation was indeed a curious one.

“You really need not trouble yourself on the score of preventing me from continuing my social duties, Miss Ashcroft,” I said as I took a cigarette from my case. “Truth to tell, I find these days we are spending in the perpetration of this social fraud extremely delightful. No one suspects anything at the hotel, I’m sure.”

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"I don't think they do," she said. "Otherwise the Joyce-Brownes wouldn't speak to me, and certainly that woman, Mrs. Northover, would be the first to 'cut' me. She's a fearful scandal-monger, as you know."

"Yes," I said, laughing. "I was speaking to her last night after dinner, and she remarked to me what a delightful talker my 'sister' was! Therefore why trouble yourself?"

She hesitated, her fine eyes fixed straight before her.

"I have reasons," was her vague reply, in a hard unusual tone.

"You are surely safe from your enemies. They are searching for you in England, I suppose."

"Yes," she replied. "By this time, however, they have no doubt come to the conclusion that I have re-crossed the Channel, and they may find me at any moment. Ah!" she cried, regarding me with a strange expression, "you don't know, Mr. Laird! You cannot tell in what constant haunting dread I live each day. Each day, alas! brings me nearer to exposure—nearer to death!"

"Come, come," I said quickly, in an endeavour to place aside her misgiving. "Why anticipate disaster? Sufficient when it arrives. But," I added, "I don't see anything to fear so long as we remain here in our present odour of high respectability."

"Can't you see that I might any day be recognised?"

"By whom?" I asked quietly.

"By—well, by my enemies," she replied. But I knew that the word police had been upon the tip of her tongue.

"And if they recognised you—what then?"

"What then?" she echoed hoarsely, rising from where she had been sitting. "Why, for me recognition would mean the end—the end of my career—the exposure of the truth—a truth which I have been hoping to conceal from you—my kind and generous friend."

"Why conceal it from me?" I queried in a low, sympathetic voice, rising and standing at her side.

"Because—because if you were aware of it, Mr. Laird—if you—— But there—don't let's discuss it! Soon the end must come. You will know who and what I am—and—and then you will curse even my memory!"

CHAPTER XII

INTRODUCES A LEAN STRANGER

"YOU are my friend," I said very quietly.
"Why should I curse your memory?"

"Because I have not told you the truth," was her answer.

"You can tell it to me now."

"No. I cannot," she faltered. "You will find it out for yourself soon enough. Why do you think I exist in this daily, hourly dread? Why have I enlisted your sympathy and assistance to get away from England? Cannot you guess?"

I was silent. What indeed could I say?

"Come," she urged at last, in a tone of impatience. "Let us get back. The awful desolation of the place is like the desolation of my own heart. I can't bear it," and she glanced round the ruined church with a shudder.

Something had upset her. I knew that she had that morning received a letter. The address upon the envelope was in a man's bold hand, and it bore a German stamp with the postmark of

Wurzburg. Probably it had contained disconcerting news.

I wondered whether it was from her father, the man Jim Almond, for whom Miller was so actively in search.

Together we drove back to Bordighera. With the sundown it had suddenly grown very chilly, as it always does on the Riviera. She sat huddled up in her astrachan coat—one she had bought in Paris on her way through—her boa of Arctic fox twisted across her face as protection from the cold wind that now blew from the sea into our faces.

From the moment we left the ruined village she hardly uttered a single word. Her white brow was wrinkled in deep thought, and her eyes fixed straight before her upon the streak of crimson light that showed on the far-off western horizon.

I tried to rouse her from her melancholy, but with little success. A strange presage of coming evil seemed to have fallen upon her.

Often I reflected upon that man Pontifex, wondering what connection he could have with her father and herself. If he were one of Jim Almond's ingenious accomplices, then he remained entirely unsuspected, for he went about openly, and without any fear of recognition. More than once I had referred to him, but Lillah had merely told me that he was an old and

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trusted friend. Yet this very fact that they could communicate by code showed that some close association existed.

Was that code the same in which she had written that curious cipher message while traveling in the Scotch express? I was inclined to think that it was.

I still held my copy of the message. Ah! how many times had I tried in vain to decipher it.

More than once, and perhaps never more so than on that evening as we drove through San Remo, and around the headland to Bordighera, was I tempted to refer to the cipher message and the mysterious death of the young and unknown foreigner at Gerrard's Cross. But on each occasion I hesitated, fearing that, to expose what knowledge I had gained, might defeat the end I now had in view, namely, the elucidation of the mystery surrounding her, and the actual identity of the assassin.

Was she the murderess?

I recalled every word of that evidence given at the Bull Hotel. And when I did so I held my breath, and bit my lip.

I longed to pay a flying visit to London, and ascertain from Miller what he had discovered. Well I knew his careful, painstaking methods, and how in pursuing such an inquiry he would spread the drag-net of the police in every direc-

tion. I recollected, too, his confidence that sooner or later he would find Iris Almond.

Dusk was falling as, on coming down the main street of Bordighera, which runs parallel with the sea, we turned up to the right, where the great white hotel stood facing us.

As we did so, my companion gave a perceptible start, and quickly turned her face towards me. I glanced at her. Her countenance was pale and rigid, her cheeks drawn, her eyes haggard. The whole character of her features had, in that instant, altered.

"You've recognised someone," I whispered to her without daring to look round.

"Yes," she gasped. "How was my fur? Look."

"It concealed the whole of the lower portion of your features. There is really no cause for alarm, I assure you," I said. "Nobody would recognise you in this half-light. Your hat hides your forehead. Besides, your veil is a protection."

"I wear it always for that very reason. But—but are you quite certain there would be difficulty in recognising me?" she asked anxiously as we turned into the hotel garden.

"Yes, nobody could recognise you at that distance, and in this uncertain light."

"But if I have been seen?" she whispered hoarsely. "If they have found me? I—I——"

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"Be careful," I urged. "Betray no fear, now that we are entering the hotel. Your apprehensions are entirely groundless. You are not quite yourself to-day, Miss Ashcroft. Did you have bad news this morning?"

"I had news which sight of that man we passed has proved to be correct. I've been warned, alas! too late."

And the carriage having drawn up at the portico of the hotel, she held her breath, and, descending, entered the hall, where she greeted with marvellous calmness a well-dressed elderly woman who chanced to be seated there—her acquaintance Mrs. Northover.

No one who saw her would ever dream that only a minute previously a ghost of the past had arisen before her. And that for aught she knew, denunciation and exposure might occur within the next half-hour.

She excused herself quickly and ascended to the lift. That evening I did not see her again.

After dinner I played billiards with a young French viscount, with whom I had struck up acquaintanceship, but my heart was not in the game. I was wondering who could be the person whom Lillah had seen in the dusky twilight.

As we had turned the corner, there had been several persons, evidently visitors, in the vicinity. Among them, I recollected, were two girls with tennis rackets, and a young man in flannels, as

well as other persons of whom I had not taken any notice.

It must have been one of those whom she had feared had recognised her—perhaps a police-agent whom she knew by sight. The international thieves, male and female, always possess keen scent for the police, and their movements and escapes are marvels of clever subterfuge. In my own cosmopolitan experience I had come across several of the fraternity, those men and women who live upon their wits, constantly moving hither and thither about the Continent, mostly in the track of the unsuspecting tourist, who so eagerly chums with any compatriot he may meet in a foreign watering-place.

Now I had always heard that the police along the Italian Riviera were a particularly shrewd body. And, indeed, in places such as San Remo they are compelled to be. So the more I reflected through that night, the more convinced I became that Lillah had recognised one of the men we passed as a police agent, and thus knew that her whereabouts had been discovered.

Next morning when she entered the *salon* and seated herself—for they serve breakfast in the English style at the *Angst*—she laughed merrily, while upon her face remained no trace of the gloom and apprehension that had obsessed her on the previous night.

The day was lovely, the bright sun shining

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in at the open windows, while from the garden below rose the sweet perfume of the flowers. How different, indeed, from the great winter in dear old London !

I mentioned the incident of the previous evening, but with a light laugh she replied :

" Perhaps, after all, I was mistaken. And even if I were not, you say that I could not be recognised."

" I don't think anyone could have seen sufficient of your face," I declared.

" Well, my hat and dress were certainly different," she said, as though speaking to herself. " I don't think he could possibly have noticed me."

" Well, let's hope not, and trust to luck," I exclaimed cheerily. And then I suggested a run in a car to lunch at Alassio. I dearly wished to go in the other direction, to the " Bristol " over at Beaulieu, beyond Monte Carlo. But alas, I was too well known there, and too many of my friends would be idling about.

" Yes," she replied. " I can wear my motor-veil with the talc front. It effectually disguises me. Yes. Let us go to Alassio," she cried eagerly.

And so an hour later we were speeding along the sea-road to San Remo again, a white, hilly road that winds around the broken coast with the tideless sea lapping lazily upon the one side

and the fields of violets and carnations, grown for the markets of Paris and London, rising on the other.

After luncheon, taken *al fresco* outside a small *trattoria*, we drove on ten miles or so to a quaint little old fishing town called Finale Marina, a place of dark alleys and ponderous archways, supporting high, prison-like houses, a typical little Italian town, which modern progress had left unchanged. For some hours we wandered about, for my dainty little friend was now in the best of spirits, and before we got back to Bordighera it was already dusk.

We dined together at the big table in the *table d'hôte* room, and after coffee in the lounge she ascended to her room to obtain an illustrated paper for a girl with whom she had been chatting.

Five minutes later I followed her to get some cigars, but I had hardly entered the room when the floor-waiter tapped at the door, and, entering, said in Italian :

"There is a gentleman below who desires to see the signorina. He will give no name, the hall-porter says, but desires to speak with the Signorina Laird upon a very urgent matter."

Lillah's face went pale as death as, turning from the table where she had been sorting out some illustrated papers, she glanced across at me, and gasped in English :

"Mr. Laird—I—I told you so ! He saw me

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last night and—and he recognised me! I'm lost. I've been a fool. I should have left to-day, as I at first intended."

For a moment I did not reply. I realised considerable peril in the situation at that moment.

Then, turning to the waiter, I said in Italian: "Now, Giovanni, do me a favour."

"Si, Signore."

"Go downstairs into the hall, see this gentleman, and tell him that the signorina has gone to the dance at the 'Savoy' at San Remo."

But scarcely had I uttered those words when the door, which had been standing ajar, was flung open by a tall, thin, rather well-dressed, grey-haired, and grey-bearded man.

"No, Mr. Laird," he said firmly. "That excuse will scarcely do for me! I have watched mademoiselle while she ate her dinner this evening, and I wish to speak with her upon—well, upon a rather confidential matter."

Lillah stood staring at him. Her face was blanched to the lips, her jaw had fallen as though an apparition had risen before her transfixed gaze.

"I think, perhaps, it would be best if you left us alone together, Mr. Laird," said the stranger with confidence, and yet in a manner somewhat polished. "I believe I voice mademoiselle's wish in this matter—eh?" and he looked at her inquiringly.

She nodded in the affirmative, and then, as though fearing to look again into my face, she hung her head.

The blow she feared had fallen.

Thus dismissed, I turned unwillingly upon my heel, and followed Giovanni out into the corridor, the lean stranger slowly closing the door after me.

For a moment I halted. I heard the man's deep voice speaking within.

Then a shrill shriek of despair reached me where I stood—a startled cry that told its own bitter truth.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LEAN ENGLISHMAN

I WAITED outside. She had not called me within the room.

Had the lean Englishman arrested her? In any case he had made some announcement which had caused her the utmost consternation and dismay. I was all impatience to hear the fatal truth.

I could hear them in conversation, but at first could distinguish no word uttered. The man was, however, speaking calmly, seriously, and as though with great determination.

Recollection of those words of hers when she anticipated detection, came to me. "If they have found me?" she had gasped. Who were "they"? The police, or those enemies to whom she referred so mysteriously?

I confess I felt some annoyance that I had not been invited by her to be present at that interview. Yet Miller's strange allegations crowded upon me at that instant, the startling truth that she was the daughter of Jim Almond, chief of a gang of international thieves. I had

tried my hardest to disbelieve his story; but alas! in vain. All the facts went to prove that his allegation was correct. Lillah Ashcroft and Iris Almond were one and the same person.

Once I heard her voice raised in protest.

"I will not," she said fiercely. "I will be no party to it. I'll not betray him!"

"Very well," answered the man. "You know what you must expect—what is the penalty of disobedience."

"But give me time," she implored. "Give me time to think. I beg of you."

"You have already had ten days. I am here for your decision," he replied firmly.

"I have already given it."

"And it is a refusal—eh?" he asked.

"Yes."

That portion of their conversation which I overheard made it plain that the lean stranger was not a police agent. More than likely he was one of her father's confederates, and that he was there to urge her to render assistance in some further ingenious and dastardly *coup*.

That he threatened her was plain by the next words he uttered.

"Very well," he said, "I shall return at once, and inform Pontifex of your decision. He will either bring you to your senses, girl, or you will find yourself under arrest. You know that the English and French police are in active search

for you for the little affair near London, at Gerrard's Cross."

"Yes, thanks to you," she cried, in fierce anger. "Go—return to London, and tell Philip Pontifex what you will!"

"I warn you, miss, that this refusal will cost you your liberty!" he said meaningly. "It was certainly a clever ruse of yours to pass as 'sister' of this unsuspecting Englishman. It has, however, availed you but little."

"I have at least a friend in him!" she cried.

"Ah! if he knew the truth he'd scarcely remain your friend," sneered the stranger.

"I desire no insult from you," the girl cried. "You have made a request, a dastardly request, which I have refused to grant. That is sufficient."

"For to-day, yes," he replied in a hard voice. "But for to-morrow, no."

"Please go. Or I shall ring for the waiter."

"You dare not do that, my dear girl," he laughed defiantly. "For if I told the hotel people who Miss Laird really is, you would quickly find yourself in the hands of the local *carabinieri*. Here, in Italy, they treat prisoners with scant courtesy, as you know from experience—eh?"

"I ask you to go, Mr. Rushton," she said firmly. "I have given you my decision."

"And you're really prepared to stand the result of your refusal?"

"I am prepared for anything, after the events of the past month," was her reply. "My father is not here, or you would not dare to speak to me like this."

"It is at his request that I've come to you. I was with him in Budapest four days ago. I came direct here, to see you."

"Well, tell him I have decided to disobey him for once."

"You defy him—and me—eh?"

"If you put it so bluntly, Mr. Rushton, I do. So there's no more to be said."

"Well," he remarked, "if you are so foolish in your own interests, you must bear the consequences—and they'll be serious."

"Your threats don't alarm me in the least," she declared. "I'm used to them. Good night."

The lean stranger with the well-trimmed grey beard came forth, meeting me face to face in the corridor, but he passed me and down the stairs without a word. Yet I had opportunity to take further note of his features, which I saw were somewhat refined. His exterior was that of a prosperous English gentleman, differing in no particular from the thousands of middle-aged Englishmen of the upper class who spend the few months in winter idleness on the Riviera, save that his countenance was perhaps unusually

aquiline, and in his dark eyes was an expression of craft and cunning.

His appearance was the reverse of that of an adventurer, so gentlemanly and so eminently respectable was he.

When he had passed down the big staircase I returned along the corridor to the *salon* where Lillah stood.

As I entered, I saw that she was straining every effort to remain calm, yet by the redness of her eyes it was plain she had shed tears, while her quick breath betrayed the agitation from which she was suffering.

"I'm afraid that your visitor was an unwelcome one, Miss Ashcroft," I said, approaching her as she stood near the piano.

"Well—yes," she said, her face relaxing into a hard, forced smile. "He was—rather. I knew that he had recognised me, and what I feared has happened."

"What's that?" I asked, in pretended ignorance.

"My enemies have found me," she replied blankly, looking straight before her. "What I have dreaded has happened."

"Well—and cannot you escape them?" I asked.

She shook her head dubiously. In her blue eyes was a look of utter despair, as though she were peering into the future, and saw the grim ill-fortune it held for her.

"I fear it will be impossible," she said. "I may put on a bold front and offer defiance, but in the end, alas! I shall be compelled to submit."

"To what?"

"To—well, to their demands," was her vague reply.

"Why?"

She sighed, her face downcast, her lips pressed tightly together, and I saw that tears were welling in her splendid eyes.

"Because," she faltered, "because I dare not disobey."

"Dare not?" I exclaimed.

"No."

"But surely you can still escape them!" I exclaimed.

"I might," she said wistfully, "with your aid, perhaps I might."

"My efforts are still at your disposal, Miss Ashcroft," I said.

"Ah!" she cried, "I know how very good and generous you are to me! But I feel that I cannot further encroach upon your good nature, Mr. Laird. You have done enough in all conscience."

What I had that evening overheard was sufficient to stir me to further effort. The charge laid against her by that wandering gipsy at Gerrard's Cross might be true, nevertheless it

was plain that she was striving to resist the further temptation placed before her.

You, my reader, may ask what motive I had in falling in with her strange request that she should be allowed to pass as my sister. Well, my motive was twofold. I had become fascinated by her beauty as many another man has been fascinated by a woman whose influence, in turn, has either raised him above his fellows, or has sent him to the furthestmost depths of the Inferno. How many men, our own personal friends, owe their ruin or their fortune to a woman!

My second motive in assisting her had arisen out of the mystery surrounding her—the mystery commenced by that strange cipher which I had seen her trace with her soft, white hand—and had resulted in that visit of the lean Englishman at Bordighera.

"I take it," I said quite gently, as I slowly lit a cigarette, "that it is necessary for you to escape from here?"

"Highly necessary. But how can I accomplish it when I'm watched as I undoubtedly am?"

"There are several ways. The easiest, I think, is to exchange dresses with your maid, and slip out just as the hotel is closing at one o'clock in the morning. The train for Genoa passes at 1.58, and you'd be there early next morning. Go

to the 'Londres,' outside the station, and await me there."

"No, they'd follow you," she said. "If I go, I'll get further afield—where, I have at present no idea."

"How shall I know where you are?" I asked, for I saw that she had become eager, and anxious again at hope of escape, which she had, until that moment, deemed impossible.

"Cannot you remain here a few days after my departure, send Annetta back to her home in Parma, and then yourself travel towards Paris as far as Dijon, afterwards returning by Modane to Turin—the 'Europe' is the best hotel—and await news of me there?"

"I see. You think I must avoid being watched. It is as though one had committed a crime, and were evading the police, isn't it?"

Her countenance changed, and next second I deeply regretted having uttered that remark.

"Well," I added, "I'm perfectly willing to carry out the suggestion. You will leave to-night, of course. Don't say anything to Annetta. Simply annex some of her clothes after she's gone to bed, and slip out by the back entrance of the hotel. If anyone is on the watch he'll be expecting you to follow her, taking you to be the maid."

"The station at Bordighera is dangerous," she said. "I shall walk into Ventimiglia. I

shall have time if I leave here just before one o'clock. It isn't far, and I'm not timid. That road is much frequented at all hours."

"And money?" I asked.

"I have quite sufficient," was her modest reply, as indeed she had, for I had seen in her purse half a dozen five-hundred lira notes.

More than once I wondered how she had obtained them.

At half-past ten my "sister," having shown herself in the lounge for half an hour, went to her room and dismissed the maid as usual. I saw nothing of her, however, till a little after twelve, when she suddenly entered the *salon*, looking the exact replica of Annetta, in plain black jacket, black skirt, black straw sailor-hat and black gloves.

"Do I make a good maid?" she asked, with a light laugh.

"Excellent!" I cried. "The clothes fit quite passably."

"I've made them fit, with just a little management. I've left in Annetta's trunk two hundred lira for her to buy herself some other things. Make some plausible excuse to her and to the hotel people for my sudden departure, won't you, Mr. Laird?"

"I will, and a week to-day I shall be at the 'Europe' in Turin."

"It's really most generous of you," she de-

clared. "If I can manage to again evade them and again pass as your 'sister,' I may be successful, after all."

"Successful in what?"

"In defying them," was her quick reply. She evidently did not intend that I should know the reason of the visit of that man Rushton—a reason I was very anxious to learn.

Without luggage, save the little bag-purse she carried, she was going forth again, hunted once more by those mysterious persons who, she declared, sought her destruction.

Within myself I reflected that if Rushton carried out his threat of placing the police upon her trail, her resumption of the character of my 'sister' would be the means of quickly revealing her whereabouts, whereas if she changed her name and went to some remote spot in Central Italy, she might remain a long time before being identified.

A single woman always experiences difficulty in avoiding notice when travelling alone. With a man it is different. He can change his clothes, his name, his appearance, his profession—everything save the skin of his finger-tips. But about a woman the same personality always clings, and if a fugitive, she has upon her the eyes of every other woman with whom she comes into contact.

But Lillah Ashcroft realised all this, and I strongly suspected that this was not the first

sudden secret flight she had made in the course of her eventful career. She had gone about her preparations in a business-like and methodical manner; and presently, at a quarter to one o'clock, as she stood before me wishing me *au revoir*, I felt myself still held in wonder by her marvellous nerve and tact.

In such circumstances of defiance and the knowledge of impending betrayal, another woman would have been agitated, nervous, and unstrung. But, on the contrary, she was calm, soft-voiced, and perfectly unconcerned.

"You haven't any idea, then, as to what your destination may be?" I said, as I grasped her black-gloved hand.

"Not in the least. I shall decide after I arrive in Genoa. If I find I have escaped their vigilance I shall continue further on. If not, I shall probably take train direct to London."

"To London!" I echoed.

"Yes—and face them!" was her answer.

"*Au revoir*, my dear friend," she added. "Be careful that you are not followed from here. Till we meet again, good-bye!"

And opening the door, the girl against whom Miller had alleged such strange things, disappeared along the corridor and down the service stairs, leaving me to my own puzzled reflections.

CHAPTER XIV

SOMETHING ABOUT RALPH RUSHTON

A FORTNIGHT had passed. Fourteen days of breathless anxiety and constant suspense had gone by before I had received, while seated at dinner in the great *sala di pranzo* at the "Europe," in Turin, that open city of long colonnades, a letter of reassurance.

It was dated from the Preussische Krone Hotel, at Salzbrunn, a charming note telling me that her plans had been altered, that she had been a week in Germany, and was about to go on to Meissen. She had reconsidered the future, she told me, and had foreseen that any further endeavour to pass as my "sister" would in all probability lead to her detection by her enemies.

The latter part of the letter read :

" In the circumstances, Mr. Laird, I think it will be far the best if we remained apart for the present. I am, as you know, most devoutly thankful for all the kind assistance you have given me, and I am only acting in what I conceive to be the best interests of us both.

Therefore please return home to London. As soon as I consider all danger past I will again write to you to Savoy Court. Meanwhile I shall move about quickly, under various names most probably. Yet if you wish to communicate with me please address: 'Miss Nellie Bond, c/o Mr. Charlesworth, newsagent, 86, Gower Place, Gower Street.' Do not be anxious regarding me. At present I am quite safe, and I hope I shall remain so. I shall write to you at the earliest moment. Till then, I remain, with deepest and most heartfelt thanks, yours very sincerely, Lillah Ashcroft."

To say that I was merely disappointed would not express the utter chagrin and complete loneliness that fell upon me on reading that letter.

Remembering that I had—perhaps very foolishly—been under the spell of her great charm and beauty, and though such serious suspicion remained upon her, yet I nevertheless felt a strong and increasing impulse to shield her from arrest and exposure. Yet somehow this letter seemed as though she suspected me of having gained knowledge which connected her with the affair at Gerrard's Cross, and for that reason had fled.

Her promise to write to me seemed far too vague. She gave no date on which she would

communicate with me—only a mere promise that she would do so as early as she could.

Again, did not the fact that she had letters addressed to a London newsvendor's under the name of "Nellie Bond" show both duplicity and evasion?

I sat staring at the letter in indecision.

I was only half-way through the meal, but I rose from the table, unable to eat further. That fair-faced woman whom I first had met in the up-train from Edinburgh had now possessed me body and soul. I was compelled to admit the truth to myself, as I now admit it to you.

I knew that whatever the reason of her duplicity she was not endeavouring to obtain money from me. From the moment we had left England she had refused to allow me to pay a single *sou* on her account. She was perfectly independent, and any attempt on my part to pay for anything for her plainly annoyed her.

As I was not an over-rich man I knew that her undesirable "friends" would have no reason to trouble about me. Adventurers, and especially those of the type of Jim Almond, always make certain of their prey before spreading their net to catch him. Only a bungler attempts to rob or levy blackmail upon a poor man. Experts in the gentle art of swindling like Almond and his friends, always make careful in-

quiry beforehand, for to attack a poor man frequently means exposure and arrest.

I walked across the broad Piazza, bright in the frosty moonlight, and sent her a telegram. I addressed it to Miss Ashcroft, Preussische Krone Hotel, at Salzbrunn, urging her to meet me at once, no matter when or where, as I was ready to keep any appointment.

But at nine next morning I received a formal notification from the telegraph office, stating that the message had not been delivered, "the addressee being unknown."

Then I reflected that she was undoubtedly passing under still another *alias*.

So that day I left Turin for Paris, and on the night following was again before the blazing fire in my rooms high up in Savoy Court, with Seddon attending to my wants, and telling me of callers and inquirers on the telephone during my absence.

"About a week ago a gentleman called, and made a good many rather inquisitive inquiries regarding you, sir. He even went so far as to offer me a sovereign if I would give him your address," my faithful servant was telling me, as I sat in my own arm-chair, smoking.

"Oh!" I exclaimed in curiosity. "Who was he, pray?"

"He didn't give me any name, sir, but he was well dressed, and seemingly a gentleman. His

inquiries were so persistent that when he left I slipped down the service stairs and gained the courtyard of the hotel down in the Strand. I saw him pass into the hotel entrance, so I asked one of the under-porters if he was known. From him I learned that his name was Rushton, and that he frequents the American bar. He's very friendly with a man named Levy, who's believed to be a card-sharper, it seems—and altogether an undesirable person."

"Rushton!" I echoed, recollecting the name of the lean Englishman. "And he was making anxious inquiries concerning me, Seddon?"

"Yes, sir, He wanted to know where you were, and apparently knew you'd been to the Italian Riviera. He asked after your sister, sir—and then he laughed. I told him you had no sister—not so far as I was aware, sir."

"Quite right, Seddon," I said. "In fact you told him nothing—even though he offered you a sovereign as a bribe—eh?"

"No, sir."

Seddon was a splendidly trained servant, my confidant in many respects, yet he never presumed upon my familiarity with him.

"He was a man with a grey beard, and rather thin, and gentlemanly."

"Yes, sir. Do you know him?"

"I've met him once, Seddon," I replied. "And

I would like very much to know if he lives in London."

"Fritz, the waiter in the American bar, could probably tell us," he said. "Shall I inquire? If he don't know, some of the gentlemen who go there constantly would know."

"Gentlemen, you call them, Seddon!" I laughed. "Some of them are paid by gentlemen."

"Every man is a gentleman to a servant, sir," Seddon remarked, correcting me.

"Very will," I said, "go down into the hotel, see Fritz, and ask if he can tell you where this Mr. Rushton lives."

He was gone for nearly a quarter of an hour. When he returned he said:

"Fritz gives Mr. Rushton a rather bad character, sir. He says he suspects him of being one of a gang of sharpers who, until two years ago, used to cross and re-cross on the American liners between Liverpool and New York. I've asked him to come up and see you, sir. He's here," and next moment the rather stout German waiter was ushered in.

"You want to know about Mr. Ralph Rushton, sir," he said in very good English. "Well, he comes into the bar nearly every day, and he keeps very bad company. One afternoon six months ago a young American named Wilson, staying at the hotel, recognised him in the bar,

and, declaring that he'd robbed him of three thousand dollars at poker on board the *Mauretania*, struck him in the face. There was a scene, in which Rushton was compelled to quit, and two men present told me that he was a 'crook' in league with several others. For some months I didn't see him. Now, however, he's appeared again, apparently with plenty of money. He comes and goes like all his kind—lives on his wits, without a doubt."

"You don't happen to know a man frequenting your bar named Almond?" I asked. "He isn't in England just now, but he often comes to London."

"Not under that name," replied the waiter. "He probably uses another when he visits us. Such men find it convenient to do so. I often overhear some strange conversation, Mr. Laird, I can assure you."

Further, Fritz told me that one of Rushton's most intimate associates was a man named Freshfield, who had been implicated in the Deutsche Bank fraud in Cologne three years before, and who had escaped with only twelve months' imprisonment.

"Do you know a man named Pontifex—one of Rushton's friends?" I inquired.

"No, sir," was the German's reply. "But, of course, they all have *aliases*. All American bars are the same. They seem always to exercise a

peculiar fascination for 'crooks.' We are no exception, you know."

"Where does Rushton live?"

"Well, sir," he replied, "I happened to pick this off one of the tables only the other day. He had given it to an American, who had left it behind." And he handed me a visiting-card, whereon was the name: "Ralph Rushton, 17, Arodene Mansions, Shaftesbury Avenue."

"May I keep this?" I asked.

"Certainly, sir. And any information I can obtain I'll let you know," replied the man, and a moment later bowed himself out.

Two hours later I had dined at the club, and returned again to my chambers, where I was sitting at ease in my slippers before the fire, contemplating giving the man Rushton an unexpected call in the morning, when Seddon again tapped at the door, and entering, said:

"There's Inspector Miller to see you, sir. Wants to see you urgently, he says, sir."

"Oh, show him in!" I cried, jumping to my feet, for most of all I desired to have a chat with my detective friend, and learn how far he had proceeded with the inquiry into the Gerrard's Cross mystery.

A second later Miller, dressed in a suit of grey tweeds, which gave him the appearance of a country squire, entered, and shaking my hand, said:

" I must apologise, Meester Laird, for coming to you at this late hour, but I rang up the club, and heard you had just returned from abroad. The fact is, I want you to do me a favour—to translate for me some letters in Italian. I know several languages, but unfortunately not Italian."

" In connection with some case, I suppose ? "

" In connection with that affair at Gerrard's Cross," he said. " I've been busy upon it ever since you've been away, and have found out some very curious facts. Translate these, and I believe they will reveal to us something of the greatest interest regarding the dead man, and those responsible for his tragic end."

I glanced at the three letters, written upon thin foreign note-paper, and I think I must have started at sight of them.

They were, I saw in an instant, penned in that thin, angular writing I knew so well—the hand of the girl who passed as Lillah Ashcroft !

I held one unsteadily in my hand, and to myself read the first sentence.

To me, that was sufficient. I stood there staring at the letter aghast, bewildered, benumbed.

And knowing that the great international detective was regarding me in wonder, and in suspicion, I became covered with confusion.

CHAPTER XV

ABOUT JIM ALMOND'S DAUGHTER

"WELL!" asked the big bearded man, who was such a terror to the foreign criminal in London. "What do you make of it, Meester Laird?"

I tried to remain calm, glancing swiftly over the letters which, evidently written by Lillah, were from an address in the Altstadischer Graven, in Danzig, to her father. The first words translated into English were:

"The Brussels police are hot on my track, but by a clever ruse of Ralph Rushton's I have managed to get safely here."

But as I read on I saw that they contained little that was of real interest to Miller. One letter indeed was an earnest appeal to her father to cut himself adrift from his friends.

"Why do you continue this life, dear father? You surely now have enough to allow us to live comfortably, as we once did. This life of being continually hunted is killing me. I remember your words to me a

month ago, your regrets that you have brought me up to be an associate in your schemes. Well, why not cut yourself adrift from it all? I forgive you for all the past, because you are my father, but I implore you, for your own sake and for mine, to run no further risks. Retire, and leave matters to Rushton, Pontifex, and the rest. I have assisted you ever since I became old enough, and now let us live quietly and happily, and in security."

How long ago that letter was written I could not tell. There was no envelope to show the date, but it was certainly prior to her love for the man who had been so cruelly assassinated near Gerrard's Cross.

I read that letter to Miller, but he only laughed it to scorn.

"Jim Almond is too hardened a sinner ever to reform," he declared. "I suppose his girl had become frightened of the Brussels police when she wrote that. I recollect the affair, nearly a year ago now. A messenger from the Bank of Belgium was knocked down and robbed in a side street off the Montagne de la Cour in broad daylight, and several thousands of pounds' worth of negotiable securities were stolen. They suspected Jim Almond and his gang—as one of the bonds was offered for sale in Paris next day by a fellow called Rushton, known to be an as-

sociate of Almond. Hence the Belgian police telegraphed to me, believing that the precious crowd had returned to England. They evidently got on the track of Rushton and the girl, the latter escaping to Danzig."

"You still believe then that she killed that young foreigner at Gerrard's Cross?" I asked quickly.

"Of course," was his unhesitating reply. "I've learned one or two things of late which confirm my suspicions. There was a very strong motive why she should rid herself of him."

"What motive?" I demanded anxiously.

"My inquiries are not yet complete, Meester Laird," he answered with tantalising vagueness.

"When they are, I'll tell you one or two things about that girl which will no doubt surprise you."

"You promised to do that before."

"I shall redeem my promise before long, never fear. But," he added, "what does the other letter say?"

I read the third and remaining letter, written on different paper from the other two. It bore the address of the Hotel d'Angleterre, Hildesheim, but no date, and read:

"Philip (meaning, no doubt, Pontifex) is here, staying at the 'Kaiserhof,' while Ralph is at the 'Krone.' The best things in the treasury of the Cathedral appear to be a silver Byzan-

tine cross of the ninth century, a silver casket of the thirteenth century, a gold crown of the eleventh century, Bernward's chalice, a fine silver one of the fifteenth century, and some illuminated manuscripts of the tenth century. Ralph has obtained an impression of the sacristan's key, and in two or three days they intend to try their fortune. Philip saw old Jacobsen in Utrecht, and arranged for their disposal. They will be sent to America the same day that he receives them. Philip has asked me to write this, and says Ralph will 'wire' you on arrival in Utrecht with the things."

"By Jove!" cried Miller. "Then it was Almond's gang who robbed the treasury at Hildesheim! The German Government have offered ten thousand marks reward for information which may lead to their recovery. And here we have the name of the receiver—Jacobsen, of Utrecht—one of the most crafty and cunning old birds in Europe! I shall cross to-morrow and see him. He'll either tell me where the things are in America, or he'll find himself under arrest."

"But where did you obtain these letters?" I inquired.

"From some of Jim Almond's belongings. He left a bag at the Midland Hotel, St. Pancras, and

it was placed in the storeroom. We sometimes go through stuff left or seized for rent at hotels. A sergeant going through this bag to-day saw several letters addressed to Mr. James Almond, and recognising the name, brought me this correspondence in Italian. I made inquiry, and found that the owner of the bag arrived in London from the North one evening about two months ago, changed his clothes, and went forth again. He left his bag, and has not been seen since. Either he had forgotten that the letters were in it, or, what was more probable, he suspected we were waiting for him, and feared to return and secure his property."

"I suppose they carry on their correspondence in Italian, as it is not so universally known as French, and therefore not so likely to be read," I remarked.

"Yes," replied my friend, the detective. "But it is an important find. We shall probably recover the Hildesheim treasures, which, as I dare say you know, include some of the most valuable works of art in Germany."

"And you intend crossing to Utrecht to-morrow?"

"Certainly. I had no idea that the robbery was the work of the Almond combination—a combination which embraces men who are expert in various branches of crime, from common theft to forgery."

"And the girl, what part does she play?"

"I've already told you, Meester Laird. She's a delightful little person, I believe, but she's their 'catpaw.' She obtains information for them, and often acts as their decoy. It's said she's been well trained by old Jim. But she's not alone in the criminal world. When I retire and write my reminiscences of the 'Yard,' perhaps I shall be able to relate some strange stories of young girls and women acting as assistants to the cleverest of our rogues, among whom, however, there is nobody so daring, or possessed of such marvellous cunning, as Jim Almond himself."

These details regarding the theft of works of art in Germany, penned by Lillah's own hand—the characteristics of which were so marked as to be indisputable—caused me to ponder. That letter was evidently written before her appeal to her father to abandon his evil life. But surely Almond had made a slip in abandoning his bag containing that incriminating correspondence.

"I thought these letters had reference to the crime at Gerrard's Cross," I remarked with some disappointment.

"So did I," he said. "But we have at least cleared up one point by them, and we shall recover that stuff for the Germans, or my name isn't Müller."

The German police were his particular friends. To oblige them he would go to any amount of trouble, while towards the French and Italian police he was somewhat prejudiced, even antagonistic. Being the chief officer dealing with the foreign criminals in London his knowledge of them was unequalled. Not long ago he had told me that, though there were treaties of extradition in force with every European country except Greece, yet Germany was practically the only country which asked for their escaped criminals to be sent back to them. Other nations seemed glad to get rid of them, and did not request their arrest and extradition unless actually obliged. The Italian criminal, for instance, when once over the frontier, is free. They are glad to see the back of their undesirables, and it is believed that their escape abroad is often connived at by the police on the frontier. In this way it is computed that on an average no fewer than five hundred assassins escape from the kingdom of Italy annually!

Miller bit the cigar I handed him, and drank the whisky and soda Seddon poured out.

"By the way," I exclaimed presently, "do you happen to know the two men, Rushton and Pontifex, mentioned in one of these letters?"

"Rushton has 'done time' once, if I remember aright. But Pontifex, though an intimate asso-

ciate of 'Slim Jim,' as they call him, has never been caught, though, no doubt, to his cleverness with his pen some of their many *coups* have been due."

"He's a forger, then?"

"Yes, and an expert thief as well, if my information is correct. A jealous woman once gave him away, but I couldn't get sufficient evidence for arrest. Rushton is a card-sharper, among other things. It was he, and a friend of his, who, about three years ago, started a little private gaming-house over in Maida Vale. They then went about London, and especially the big hotels, for 'pigeons' to pluck—rich young men up from the country or Americans over to see Europe. At that house, Meester Laird, young Trench, son of old Abel Trench, of San Francisco, who had only just come into his money, lost eighteen thousand pounds in a single evening. And he paid it next day, but our precious friend Rushton was missing an hour after receiving the money. The boy, after paying this debt, came to the 'Yard,' told me he felt certain he'd been swindled, therefore I at once went down to the place in a cab. In the room the cards were scattered all over the carpet, but the house was empty. The pair of birds, as well as 'Slim Jim' and his daughter, had flown!"

"Was Almond's daughter there?" I asked quickly.

"Young Trench said so. He says that once he caught Almond holding a little mirror in his palm as he stood behind his chair. He said nothing, resolved to trap them on the next occasion he played. But he came to us too late."

"What did he allege against Almond's daughter?" I demanded.

"Oh, nothing much, except that once or twice she had, under pretence of sympathising with him in his bad fortune, induced him to double his stakes, with the inevitable result. They seemed to have nursed him carefully," Miller added, "for Rushton had purposely crossed with him on the *Kronprinzessin Cecilie* from New York to Plymouth, and on the voyage had allowed him to win a couple of hundred pounds. Then, on arrival at the 'Carlton,' he fell innocently into the trap, just as others had done. They're a dangerous gang, Meester Laird," he declared, "a very dangerous gang indeed."

"But this girl, Iris, I think you call her! She interests me. She can't be so very dangerous, surely? Look at that letter to her father!"

Miller smiled.

"It was probably written with some ulterior object," he said. "I should judge from all the facts within my knowledge that the girl has a very good time of it, so I don't see why she should desire to lead a quiet life—unless, of

course, she finds us getting a little too warm on her track. But we shall have her for the Gerard's Cross affair before long—never fear.”

“ You haven't any idea where she is at present, I suppose ? ”

“ Abroad. She's somewhere in Germany, and the German police at my request are in active search for her. She was known to be at Erfurt seven days ago, but it seems she's slipped away again.”

“ And Jim Almond ? ”

“ He was last heard of in Budapest, but will most probably return very shortly to his old quarters in Paris—where the vultures seem to have their nest. We shall hear something further of them very soon without a doubt.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN WITH A RECORD

ON the following morning, at eleven, I left the Strand, and, walking through Charing Cross Road and Tottenham Court Road, came to Gower Place, a turning which led from Gower Street into Endsleigh Gardens.

I found Mr. Charlesworth's shop, a small news-agent's, where cheap stationery and children's toys were sold. Inside was a stout, rather slatternly woman behind the counter, one of those women who move slowly and breathe heavily.

Approaching her judiciously, I made inquiry as to whether she knew Miss Nellie Bond.

"Oh, I dunno', sir. She 'as letters 'ere sometimes. They're generally 'ere a long time before she calls for 'em. She's a nice young lady—a governess in a gentleman's family, she once told me. That's why she travels such a lot."

"Have you any letters waiting for her now?" I ventured to inquire.

"Yes, sir, two," and she showed me two letters, the superscription of which was in a man's heavy handwriting, and which bore

Austrian postage stamps—evidently from her father.

So it was plain that even he did not know her present hiding-place.

"Miss Bond has had her letters addressed here for a long time, I suppose?"

"About a couple of years, I should say," was the woman's reply. "I expect she uses this address for her love-letters, like lots o' girls do—and ladies, too, for the matter of that. Why, sir, I've had more than one titled lady having letters addressed as plain Miss So-and-So, an' payin' a penny a time for 'em."

"Yes," I remarked. "I suppose it's mostly girls who use your address."

"Oh, and men also. I've several racin' gentlemen who use this address."

"I suppose you know nothing of Miss Bond—I mean as to who she may be," I said, knowing that the woman probably took me for a lover, while at the same time I placed half a sovereign upon the counter.

Mrs. Charlesworth eyed the bribe greedily, and then, with some hesitation, said:

"Well, sir, to tell the truth I think she's a young lady whose father's come down in the world. I remember once I sent 'er letters on—to some address in 'Ampshire—somewhere near Andover—but I didn't keep it. I never do keep addresses."

"How long ago?"

"Oh, perhaps eighteen months," was her vague reply. "But, of course, I don't know whether that was 'er father's 'ouse, or only 'er employer's."

"Then she has actually been a governess?"

"I feel sure o' that, for about six weeks before I sent 'er letters care of a Mrs. Thomasson, somewhere near Newcastle-on-Tyne, and she told me 'erself that she was a-teachin' that lady's little girl, and what soul-killing work teaching was."

I reflected for a moment. Surely Lillah must have taken the post of governess with some other object—the object, perhaps, of finding out where the lady's jewels, or the master's securities were kept!

"When was she last here?"

"In the first few days of January. She had quite a lot of correspondence just then—letters bearing Italian stamps."

I was silent. Were they from Paul, the man now dead?

"She called for them herself?" I asked at last.

"Always. She came every day about five o'clock. Then one day she said she was goin' to Scotland, and I have not seen 'er since. No letters have come for 'er—except these two."

"Well, Mrs. Charlesworth," I said, after a pause, "the fact is I want very much to find this young lady."

"Ah, sir, I thought as much," replied the Cockney woman. "You're not the first gentleman as 'as been 'ere to make inquiry about 'er. It seems there's some mystery about 'er."

"There is, and, frankly, I want to solve it."

"Well, sir, I'm sorry I can't 'elp yer any more than I've done. I've told yer all 'as I know. She's never been really very free with me, an' if there's a mystery about 'er she ain't likely to be, is she?"

So, much disappointed, I left the dark little shop, and hailing a hansom in Gower Street drove westward to the club to lunch.

That afternoon I made a bold resolve—to call upon Ralph Rushton. I was curious to see what manner of man was this expert thief and sharper and to form my own conclusions.

Arodene Mansions were, I found, over some shops nearly opposite the Lyric Theatre, and when I rang at the door of number seventeen, on the second floor, it was opened by a white-faced, consumptive-looking young man, who eyed me suspiciously, and inquired my name.

When I had given it, Rushton himself—the lean Englishman of Bordighera—came to the door, expressing surprise at seeing me.

"I've called to ask whether you know Miss Ashcroft's address," I said. "We met, you recollect, at the 'Angst,' at Bordighera."

"I recollect perfectly, Mr. Laird," said the

thin, grey-bearded gentleman, inviting me in to a chair by the fireside. The room was typical of the London flat, small and cosy, furnished in the art style which is generally synonymous with "the three years' system." Then, after glancing at me for a moment, he went on, "The lady was passing as your 'sister'—a rather clever ruse to escape detection, wasn't it?"

"Detection for what?" I asked.

The fellow only shrugged his shoulders.

"Come," I said, "your words imply some allegation against Miss Ashcroft. What is it?"

"My dear sir," he exclaimed. "It is not my habit to make any charge against a lady."

"But you have made a charge against her,"

I protested. "The lady is my friend."

"For how long?" he laughed. "Why, my dear Mr. Laird, you don't know what you are saying. The differences between Miss Ashcroft and myself must be left to ourselves to adjust."

"I was not aware there were any differences," I said.

"Well, there are," was his reply. "It was because of them that I called upon her at Bordighera. Our interview was somewhat unpleasant. But perhaps she has already told you," he added.

"Miss Ashcroft has not made me her confidant," I said. "I merely called because I

thought you might possibly know where she is at the present moment."

"Unfortunately I have no idea of her address," was his rather cool response. Then he added: "I suppose Miss Ashcroft is a friend of yours, eh! or you would not have consented to her ruse of assuming the identity of your 'sister'?"

"She is a friend," I said; but I vouchsafed no further fact.

"Well," he said, "of course you are in ignorance of the real facts, otherwise you would not have become her 'catpaw,' as you apparently have."

"I have yet to discover that," I said. "I am not, perhaps, so well acquainted with Miss Ashcroft as yourself, yet I have no knowledge of the manner in which I have been made a 'catpaw,' as you put it."

"You will discover that before long," he said, with a laugh. "I merely warn you, Mr. Laird, that's all."

Ralph Rushton, as he lolled in his big, dark green arm-chair beside the fire presented nothing of the appearance of the expert card-sharper or international thief. He was in a brown lounge-suit, and wore a fine diamond and sapphire scarf-pin that danced in the light of the flames. Upon his thin white fingers, those tapering fingers that manipulated the cards so expertly, were a couple of fine rings, one with a diamond

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set in it, while the other was an ancient engraved signet ring. A fine coat of arms was upon it, and he told strangers that it was an heirloom of his family, whereas, if he told the truth, he would relate how he purchased it one day at an antique dealer's on the Ponte Vecchio, in Florence.

His demeanour was quite calm and unperturbed. My inquiry regarding Lillah apparently did not cause him the least surprise. He never asked me, even, how I got to learn his address. I saw by his sphinx-like face what a past master he was in the art of keeping his countenance.

"I think," he said at last, "if you will permit me to say so, it is for the best that you should not seek for Miss Ashcroft's company."

"Why?"

"Well—something might occur to cause you considerable unpleasantness," replied the man whom I knew to be a criminal—the man who had among other things stolen the gems of the treasury at Hildesheim.

"I know," I said. "You anticipate that Miss Ashcroft may be arrested."

"Well, if you put it so, I admit it," he laughed.

For a few moments I did not speak, wondering what would be the result of the stroke of diplomacy which, as I lay awake on the previous night, I had calmly contemplated. Dare I carry it out?

I hesitated, for if I failed, then I might only place Lillah in further jeopardy. Yet if I was successful I might succeed in crushing this grey-faced, calm-mannered adventurer, who was her bitterest enemy. I knew I was playing with edged tools, that I had entered the ring of a dangerous gang of criminals, of whom this man Rushton was one of the most clever and daring, and unscrupulous.

"Now, listen for a moment, Mr. Rushton," I said, boldly, at last looking straight into his eyes. "I am here, not as your enemy, but as your friend—providing you are ready to agree to a compact I will propose."

"I am listening," he said, unmoved, thrusting his hands deeply into his trousers pockets.

"Well, first, I may as well explain that I know who and what you are—Ralph Rushton, wanted on half a dozen different charges."

He sprang to his feet, and his hand went to his hip-pocket, where he carried a revolver.

"No," I exclaimed. "Just sit down. I am not a detective officer, but I happen to know certain things concerning you which—well, which are hardly creditable, shall we say?" and I smiled grimly.

"The girl has told you!" he cried fiercely. "She's given us away."

"Miss Ashcroft has, I assure you, not uttered a single word against you, nor has she made any

revelations. What I know is from my own friends of Scotland Yard."

The man was silent, regarding me with distinct suspicion.

"Now," I went on, "you went to Bordighera in order to compel Miss Ashcroft to assist you in a fresh *coup*, to act against her better nature, and because she refused, you threaten her with arrest. Suppose she were arrested, don't you think she would, in retaliation, give information against you?"

"I don't care. There's nothing against me," he exclaimed defiantly.

"You seem to lose sight of the fact that I am Miss Ashcroft's friend, and that I intend to protect her."

"Act just as you think fit, my dear sir. It is entirely the same to me," he answered carelessly.

"Very well," I said. "I shall keep the information I possess to myself, with the result that before twenty-four hours have passed, you'll find yourself under arrest."

"Me!" he cried, staring wildly.

"Yes. You! I propose to come to an arrangement whereby you secure your liberty and Lillah is freed from the bondage you and your friends have placed upon her. That is the reason of my visit here."

"And what arrangement do you propose?"

he asked. "Really I don't see what I have to fear."

"You've been completely given away to the police, Mr. Rushton," I said. "Promise me to withdraw your demands from Miss Ashcroft, and allow her her freedom—a freedom guaranteed to me, remember—and I'll tell you all. The affair is quite a simple arrangement."

At first he laughed me to scorn. It was evident that the fellow was no coward. But when I told him of my knowledge of Jim Almond, and of his other associates, he realised that I was really a power to be reckoned with.

"Well," he exclaimed gruffly at last, "if you are so anxious regarding the welfare of Lillah Ashcroft, as she now calls herself, I'll withdraw all I said. She shall in future go her own way providing your information is of such a character that I deem it wise to act upon it."

"Good," I exclaimed in satisfaction. "Then what I tell you must be in strictest confidence. I give you this warning, Mr. Rushton, only for the girl's sake, understand. The truth is that Inspector Miller, of Scotland Yard, yesterday seized a bag which Jim Almond left behind him at the Midland Hotel at St. Pancras, and in it found a letter giving details of how you and Pontifex robbed the treasury of the cathedral at Hildesheim, and sold the antique gold and

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silver works to old Jacobsen, the receiver in Utrecht."

Rushton jumped to his feet again, astounded at my words.

"Yes," he said quickly. "And—and what else?"

"Miller is now on his way over to Utrecht to first secure the arrest of Jacobsen in the hope of recovering some of the things which he intends to have you arrested immediately afterwards."

The culprit was silent. I saw that my words had created an instant change in his demeanour. What I told him had been entirely unexpected.

Next moment, however, he resumed that cold, calm, nonchalant air of his, and a silence fell between us.

Had I, in thus attempting to free Lillah, blundered beyond reparation?

The man with the black record had his eyes fixed upon mine. I tried to read his face, but only defiance was written upon it.

And then I felt certain, alas, that I had failed!

CHAPTER XVII

THE HAND OF A THIEF

THE adventurer stood for a moment with his eyes fixed upon the fire. His cigarette had died out between his thin white fingers. He was reflecting, for deep lines showed across his brow.

"You say," he said at last, "that Miller is on his way to Utrecht to see Jacobsen—eh?"

"Yes—he left London this morning."

"And you have warned me of this, Mr. Laird, in order that in return I should not seek further to demand the girl's assistance—eh?"

"Exactly."

He was again thoughtful.

"And in these letters my name is mentioned as having been connected with the affair at Hildesheim—eh?"

"Yes."

"Who wrote the letters?"

"I was not told the writer," I answered, with truth.

"By God!" he cried, fiercely, "whoever has given me away shall suffer. Jim was a fool

to leave any papers behind him. It isn't at all like him."

"Well," I said, "you quite realise the danger, Mr. Rushton. Of course, I don't know on what terms you are with this Jacobsen, but when Miller calls upon him he'll no doubt tell the truth."

"He mustn't be there when Miller calls," replied the adventurer with a smile. "I must 'wire' at once to him and warn him to escape. If the police raid his place they'll find a lot of stuff there. He's known to us, Mr. Laird, as one of the most successful receivers of stolen goods in Europe. In most of the really big things brought off on the Continent he participates."

"You mean he finances big undertakings," I suggested, grimly.

"Well, yes," he laughed. "He does. Therefore, I must let him know at once."

"And you will also go into hiding, of course."

"Certainly. I can't risk a visit from your friend Miller. He knows me a little too well. I shall probably go abroad."

"And Miss Ashcroft?"

"I have made a promise to you, Mr. Laird. As I am what I am, you probably don't believe that I shall respect it. But you have done me a great service in letting me know all this—how great you can scarcely imagine. Therefore, I am much indebted to you, and you will see that, even though I am a thief, and an associate of

thieves, I yet know how to appreciate and to acknowledge a kindness."

Then he shouted for the servant, whom he addressed as Harris, and gave him orders to pack his bags, saying that he would be going on the Continent for a month or six weeks.

Afterwards, turning to me, he said :

" Ah, Mr. Laird, you can't tell how much excitement is crammed into the lives of men of my profession. Some men are successful in business, some in the City, some at the Bar. But is not successful business nowadays a polite name for swindling ? Be a big enough thief, and you are acclaimed a successful man, and you may, if you are successful a sufficiently long time, gain a knighthood. For the big pick-pocket baronetcy, for the little pickpocket the picking of oakum. Oh, yes, life is a *great* game, isn't it, and so full of grim humour ? "

" Then you'll leave London ? " I asked.

" Yes—to-night, after I have warned Jacobson," he replied. " But tell me, Mr. Laird, is Jim Almond suspected ? "

" Yes, I believe so. Why not ' wire ' to him also ? "

" Ah ! I don't know his address. The dear old boy is ' lying low ' somewhere out in Hungary, but I don't know where."

" After that affair at Gerrard's Cross," I said very slowly, my eyes fixed upon his.

"He had nothing to do with it," was the adventurer's reply. "Your friend, Miss Ashcroft, could tell you the truth about that—if she cared—or rather if she dared."

He was standing near the fire, the fine ring flashing upon his delicate white hand. I could see he was all anxiety to become active, yet before me he refused to betray any sign of nervousness.

"Harris," he called suddenly, "I want you to take a telegram across to the post office off Piccadilly." Then obtaining a yellow foreign form he scribbled an urgent message to Jacobsen, warning him at once to go into hiding, in view of a visit from the police. This he gave to the haggard young man who acted as his servant, and sent him off to despatch it.

Miller's journey to Holland would be of no avail. The old receiver would be forewarned and escape some hours before the great detective could arrive and consult with the local police.

But Rushton beneath his breath was uttering fierce threats of vengeance upon the writer of that incriminating letter which had fallen into the hands of the police—the letter which made plain to Scotland Yard the identity of those who had so cleverly abstracted the various objects from the treasury of the cathedral at Hildesheim.

"Of course," I said, "you will carry out your portion of our compact!"

"Mr. Laird," exclaimed the man who gained his living by deceit and fraud, "if the promise of a person like myself is of any avail to you, here is my hand."

I took the proffered hand, and he grasped mine, saying :

"It is probable that the man who lives by his wits, as I do, is more faithful to a friend than the so-called honest man. We know how to appreciate a kindness, as perhaps one day you may see. Had it not been for this timely visit of yours, I should probably have been arrested this evening."

"I trust you, Mr. Rushton," I said. "Remember I have told you this—for her sake."

For a moment he said nothing. Then, looking me in the face, he exclaimed :

"I suppose you know who Miss Ashcroft really is—Jim Almond's daughter?"

"I am aware of that," I answered briefly.

"Then, as you have warned me, I warn you, Mr. Laird. Be careful. You don't know her as I do."

"I am her friend. Have you not just said that you and your associates know how to appreciate any service rendered them?" I remarked in a voice of reproach.

He shrugged his shoulders, saying :

"I've warned you—that's all."

"Where do you intend going? How will you escape from England?" I asked presently.

"By the rather roundabout route I've taken once or twice before—one where the police never dream of looking for us," he laughed. "I take the steamer from London up to Newcastle, tranship there, and cross to either Rotterdam or Antwerp."

"And that is the route usually taken by your friends?" I remarked, for what he told me was instructive.

"Yes. We run fewer risks that way," he replied. "We used to take the Weymouth and Channel Islands route across to Cherbourg, but the police have watched it ever since that Frensham Gaillard was detected while crossing, after killing the lonely old lady down in Bedfordshire. You recollect the affair—about two years ago."

"I recollect perfectly—a most cold-blooded crime," I declared. But I longed to learn more of Lillah and her father, and again turned the conversation upon Jim Almond, the director of all his exploits.

"You've never met Jim — eh?" he said. "He's a 'fly' old bird, I can tell you. You are friendly with Iris, therefore if you want to meet him you'll require no introduction from me. He's one of the most marvellous of men at our game, and his cleverness in avoiding arrest is remarkable. That's why we call him 'Slim Jim.' Ah! if he wrote a book, what a book it would be.

But," he added, "here's Harris back, and I'll have to be going. It's Wednesday to-day, and the boat for Newcastle sails from just below London Bridge at five-thirty."

And he commenced to bustle about, giving orders to Harris.

"When I'm gone you clear out at once," he told the youth who acted as his servant. "Go down to your mother in Shropshire, and lie low till I write to you—understand?"

"I want very much to re-discover Miss Ashcroft," I said. I preferred to call her by the name by which I had first known her.

"If I knew where she was I'd tell you. But I don't know in the least. She's no doubt in hiding on account of that unfortunate little affair at Gerrard's Cross in January," he added.

"But she surely had no hand in that dastardly crime!" I cried. "I'm certain of her innocence."

His calm sphinx-like face only relaxed into a slight smile. I tried to get him to speak, but he would say nothing. I recollected what I had overheard in Bordighera, and my anger arose against this man whom I had just befriended.

As I spoke he was busy clearing out some papers from a drawer, and recklessly burning them. From the same drawer he took a long, dark green morocco case, and opening it, displayed to me a fine necklet of diamonds.

"Rather good, aren't they?" he remarked with a laugh, as he took the ornament from its case, held it to the light for a second, and then thrust it carelessly into his jacket pocket and tossed the case upon the fire.

"Jim got it in Paris six months ago, but we haven't dared to get rid of it yet. The Russian Princess, to whom it belonged, is searching everywhere for it," he laughed.

I saw that from the same drawer he took several rings and other jewellery, all of which he crammed into his pockets, together with a small bundle of five-pound notes, making it evident that he was about to abandon his cosy retreat.

"When the police come to-night they won't find very much," he declared with a smile. "I won't be like old Jim, and leave a lot of letters behind me incriminating my pals."

At his invitation I went into his bedroom, where Harris was packing his clothes in an old and battered suit-case.

"Get away at once when I've gone, Harris," he said. "You know the gov'nor's post address. Write and tell him where you are, and if he should want you, go. I'm going across the way for a bit, and shall probably drift to Paris before long—the old nook."

"Yes, sir," responded the servant, who was evidently a thief like his master.

"You've got that money I gave you yesterday. It will carry you along for three months. Miller, of Scotland Yard, is prying about for us, so just keep your eyes about you. You know him—he chased us after we got that haul out of the young Americans over at Maida Vale. If he does get us we shall do a 'long stretch'—both of us, remember."

"I'll be very wary, Mr. Rushton," answered the crafty-faced young man, who was at that moment folding a coat with all the neatness and care of the experienced valet, and who, I supposed, often travelled with his master.

I saw Rushton take out more papers—share certificates and other securities they looked like, and burn them.

"There's thousands of pounds going up the chimney now," he laughed. "I only wish we could have negotiated that lot! Phil Pontifex made a mistake when he took them in Bordeaux, and left behind him the ones that were any good."

Then I saw by his anxious manner that he wanted to get rid of me, so I bade him adieu. He grasped my hand, and repeated his promise regarding Lillah. Afterwards I went downstairs and out into the bustle of Shaftesbury Avenue, after what was perhaps one of the most unusual experiences that fall to the lot of the average man like myself.

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I had entered upon the dark byways of life. I had defeated the ends of justice, it was true, but I had no qualms, for had I not at the same time acted as protector of the frail, fair-faced girl who was being hunted down by both the police and those unscrupulous persons who pretended to be her friends ?

CHAPTER XVIII

CONCERNING JIM ALMOND

IN London I remained, lonely and disconsolate. How curious it is that a man, though he may possess many friends, and though he may move amid the millions of the metropolis, may be utterly lonely and alone.

For a whole week I went about aimlessly to the club for lunch or dinner, turning into the Empire or the Alhambra afterwards, or else gossiping by the fireside in the big club smoking-room. I existed from day to day in eager expectation. I had written to Lillah at the newsagent's address, and I was hoping against hope for a reply.

Anxious to know the result of Miller's journey to Holland, I called one evening about six o'clock at the private bar of a certain public-house in Parliament Street patronised by the inspectors and sergeants at the "Yard," who usually look in there for a refresher before going home or going out on duty.

The small private bar was at the end of a short

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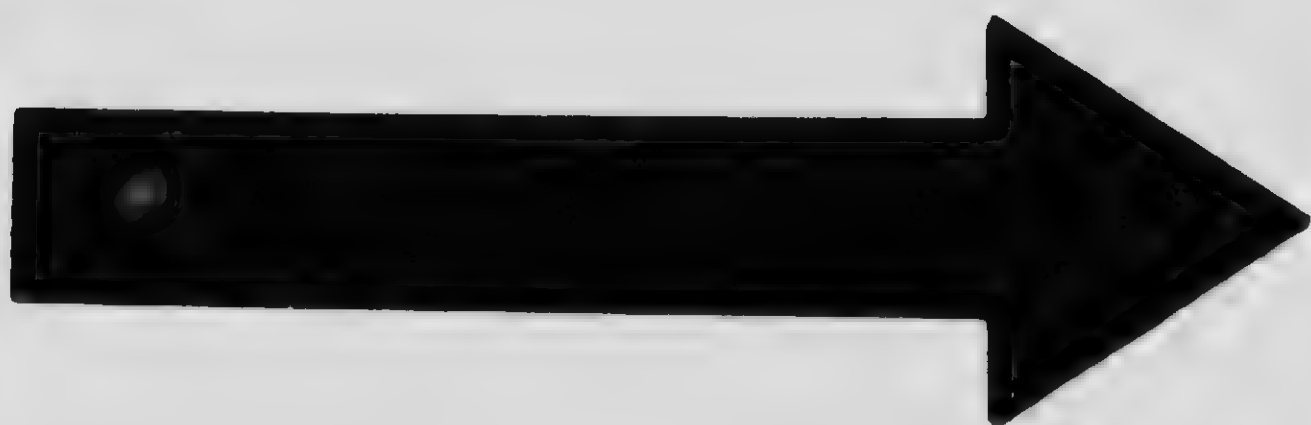
passage, with a bowl of goldfish placed upon the mantelshelf, and presided over by an astute young lady, one of two sisters who kept the place. Here many a man has been "given away" by his friend, and many a woman's crime been exposed through the jealousy of her rival, for here in this cosy, secluded nook, unsuspected by the public, the men and women paid by the Criminal Investigation Department come to give their information over a glass.

More information of importance is obtained in that little bar than in the great bare offices of the huge building which overshadows it, for here the "nark," or police spy, comes, passing through from either the Embankment or Parliament Street, and here his friend, the sergeant or inspector, is waiting to hear his report. I had been in there with Miller and his colleagues many times, and as I stood at the bar I met several men from the "Yard" and chatted with them.

In one corner a detective inspector, whose reputation was European, was chatting confidently with a low, blackguardly-looking fellow, no doubt learning some secret of a crime contemplated, or a crime committed.

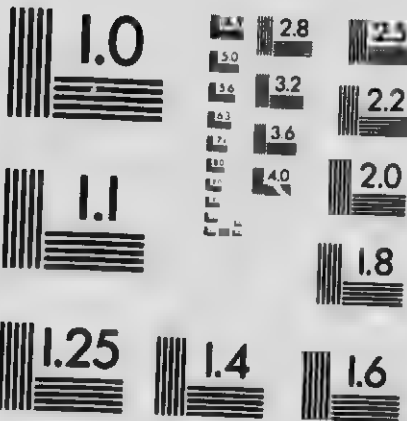
Miller entered at last, bluff and merry, with a joke to the lady behind the counter, and a hearty welcome for me.

When we had drawn aside near the fireplace



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and the goldfish I asked him how he had fared in Utrecht.

"Not very well, Meester Laird," was his reply. "I had a chat with the chief of police, but those infernal Dutchmen are so slow, and before we'd gone through all the formalities for a warrant and arrived at old Jacobsen's place, a biggish house in the Kalverstraat, he'd made himself scarce."

"Then you didn't get him?" I said.

"No. And the curious part was that he'd only left about four hours before we got there. He'd packed up all the proceeds of the various robberies which he undoubtedly had in his possession and carted them away—where, we don't know. But, of couse, he's a sly old fox, and has a good many spies in his pay. It is said that he often finances big jobs, more especially the thefts of works of art in Italy. The stealing of Raphael's Madonna from San Marco in Venice was engineered by him, they say. He sold the picture to an American for a big sum."

"Then your journey was in vain."

"Practically so," was the detective's reply. "We found some letters showing that several persons in America were in treaty for pictures and important pieces of old silver, for New York seems to be the old fellow's market."

"Anything concerning the Hildesheim treasures?"

"Not a word. The old boy tricked us very cleverly, no doubt. We learned that four big cases of stuff were sent away on the day we arrived, and we can find no trace of them: sent to the house of a neighbour or a relative, no doubt."

"I suppose you'll try and get those men mentioned in the letter—Rushton and Pontifex?" I said.

"Rushton has also left hurriedly, as though he was warned," Miller replied. "Yet how could he have known? The fact is, I'm very disappointed and puzzled, Meester Laird. I had that journey over to Holland for nothing."

"And Pontifex?"

"He's not in London. He left at the end of January, and has not been seen here since. In all probability he's with his friend 'Slim Jim,' on the Continent."

"You'll probably find old Jacobsen again, I suppose," I remarked, for want of something to say.

"Oh, I expect he'll break out in a fresh place before long. But a rich man like that is generally very hard to trap. Besides, he's hand-in-glove with the most expert thieves—the masters, I mean—and he always knows what's in progress."

I found that my friend was going along the Strand, for he had, he told me, an inquiry to

make in Ludgate Hill. So we walked together to Savoy Court, where I induced him to come up for a quarter of an hour for a cigar.

Presently, as we sat together, I said :

"Do you know, Miller, ever since you told me of 'Slim Jim' and his daughter I've been intensely interested, especially in the girl's father. What do you know of his career?"

"His career!" echoed the detective, speaking with his slight foreign accent. "Well, his career has been, perhaps, one of the most adventurous of any man alive. His life would, indeed, make a splendid romance. He's been an adventurer for the past forty years—a man who had a brilliant record, but who has lost it all nowadays by adopting the life of a thief. He's a born leader of men, and in consequence his confederates swear by him. They are entirely in his hands—the hands of the most crafty and cunning scoundrel in Europe."

"Then he hasn't always been a thief?" I exclaimed.

"No, his career, as far as we know at the 'Yard,' commenced in the early seventies, when, after shooting a man in a duel at Ems, in Germany, he went to New Zealand, and became engaged in the native wars. He was the son of a country squire near Lincoln, and after trying his hand at farming in New Zealand, went to Australia, where he had a turn of hunting bush-

rangers. Next we know that he took a schooner in search of a copper island in Polynesia, but not finding it he returned to Europe, and fought in Italy as a Papal Zouave in the ill-fated campaign which ended in the collapse of the temporal power of the Pope. All this," he said, "was given in evidence at the Old Bailey seven years ago, when he was convicted."

"Then he has been in prison?" I said.

"Several times," Miller said; and then went on: "In America he fought the Sioux, serving under the well-known Colonel Dodge, and was afterwards a commandant of irregular troops in the Gaika War in Cape Colony. He was at the Rorke's Drift disaster, and accompanied Lord Chelmsford's relief column, being in command of a thousand natives. He fought in the Basuto War in 1880, and commanded a squadron in the Bechuanaland Expedition of Sir Charles Warren in 1884, and afterwards was a captain in the Diamond Field Horse at Kimberley. He had served in many fierce fights, had been wounded several times, and after the Zulu Rebellion returned to England, where he unfortunately fell in with an old thief named Merridew, who had been with him at Rorke's Drift. The pair did one or two very clever jobs, but both were soon arrested. Merridew, who was wanted for shooting a policeman at Hornsey, got fifteen years, and died while serving his sentence, but Jim

Almond got threc, and was soon out again. From that time forth his life has been a continuous career of crime, as shown by the record we have at the 'Yard.' Possessed of remarkable courage, well educated, and with a tact and cunning that are little short of superhuman, he became the director of a gang, the *personnel* of which has altered from time to time, as the members were sent to penal servitude, but whose operations have always been of an international character and on a big scale."

"And his wife—where is she?"

"I don't know. She may be dead. All we can tell is that on his return to England, in 1888, he married the daughter of the rector of a small country village, and I can only suppose that she was the mother of Iris."

"You haven't any idea of the lady's maiden name?" I said, amazed at the adventurous career of the man Jim Almond.

"Not the slightest. It isn't in our record, which, curiously enough, I was glancing at only yesterday. No man known to us has such a career as Jim Almond," added the detective. "If he'd gone straight when he got back to England he might have got a decent appointment under the Colonial Office. Old Merridew was, however, the cause of it all—without a doubt."

"And there's a warrant out for Almond, I suppose?"

"Well, I ought not to tell you, you know, Meester Laird," he replied with a smile, with that pronounced accent. "But as a matter of fact, there is—on more than half a dozen serious charges. When we get him it'll mean twenty years' penal servitude for him, at least, whilst if he's arrested in France it will mean a 'lifer' for him at Devil's Island."

"He'll probably take good care to keep out of the way," I laughed,

"Yes, but if we can only find the daughter we shall very soon discover the father. 'Slim Jim' is devoted to the girl—they say."

"And yet he has brought her up to a career of crime!"

"Crime is his profession, my dear Meester Laird. Men such as Almond, experts at the game, take more pride in the neatness and cleverness of their *coups*, than in the amount of their gains. But I must be getting along," he added, and rising a moment later he made his way down in the lift.

What would the great detective have thought of me, I wondered, if he knew that through the warning I had given Rushton, both he and the receiver Jacobsen had gone into hiding!

But I had learnt that a warrant was out against Lillah's father on several serious charges, and my sole ambition now was to save her from arrest, and send him secret word of his own peril.

I knew all this was wrong, according to the law. Yet that fair, sweet-faced girl possessed my soul, and when a man is in love he often commits even graver follies than that I was now committing.

Weary weeks of longing lengthened into months. April was passing. London was filling up with homeward-bound idlers from the Riviera, Egypt, or India ; in St. James's Street one met men after their winter absence, while the palm-court at the "Carlton" showed more animation at five o'clock than it had done all the long dark months. Yet, not a word had I received from Lillah, though I had written three times.

I had called on several occasions upon Mrs. Charlesworth, but only once it appeared that she had orders to send on "Miss Bond's" letters, and then the address given was the Poste Restante, Louvain, Belgium. The newsagent's wife showed me Lillah's letter, three formal lines without any address, but bearing the postmark of Berlin, and enclosing an English postal order for one shilling.

I had advertised in the "agony" columns of several of the London morning papers, addressing my appeal "To Lillah." But there had been no response, the mystery of Gerrard's Cross was as great a mystery as ever, while that secret message in figures which she had penned

in the Scotch express, and which had afterwards been found upon the dead man, was as complete an enigma as ever. A thousand times had I tried to decipher it, and a thousand times had I failed.

I tried to interest myself in the life of London, in my friends at the club, in theatre-going and supper, but all with no avail. Before me arose constantly that one sweet ever-present countenance, the face of that delicate graceful woman I had so strangely grown to love.

She had lost her lover in that dark roadside tragedy of the night. Would she ever grow to love me as dearly as I loved her? I wandered through London drawing-rooms aimlessly, listlessly; I dined at friends' houses, and became bored to death with their chatter and their scandals, yet, wherever I went, I saw no woman whose face could compare with hers. She was the personification of all that was sweet, graceful, and lovable, even though she had, according to her traducers, so black a heart.

I had been for a week's golf up at Cromer, and one evening, on alighting from the train at King's Cross, I was bustling about with my clubs in search of a cab, when I heard my name uttered by someone behind me.

Turning quickly, I was confronted by the rather burly form of the well-dressed, thick-lipped man, Philip Pontifex, the man who,

among other exploits, had been associated with Rushton in the great theft at Hildesheim. He was smartly attired, wearing a silk hat and an overcoat with astrachan collar, for it was a chilly evening.

"Mr. Laird!" he exclaimed in a low voice. "I—I thought I was not mistaken! I've come here to the station because I want to consult you, and I did not wish to call at Savoy Court. A man told me you were at Cromer golfing, so I 'wired' to the hotel, and they replied, saying that you had left for London, so I met this train. I trust you will forgive me—as I think you will, when you've heard the reason I have met you. I am here to give you a message—a message from your friend, Miss Ashcroft."

At last! My heart leapt within me for joy. A message from her!

"Tell me," I cried quickly. "Where is she? It is imperative that I should see her without delay—in her father's interests—as well as hers."

CHAPTER XIX

THE CLOAK OF RESPECTABILITY

"SHE wishes to see you," Pontifex said, as we walked together towards the cross-platform, where the railway metals terminate. "It is for that reason I am here. She says she did not deem it wise, in the circumstances, to write to you."

"Where is she?" I inquired quickly.

"She's governess in a gentleman's family down in Hampshire."

"A governess! With whom?"

"With your friend, Captain Northey, of Charlwood Manor, near King's Somborne."

"With the Northeys!" I gasped, amazed, for Fred Northey and his wife were among my best friends. We had first met at the "Russie" in Rome, seven years ago, and the acquaintanceship had ripened into warm friendship. I had been to shoot at Charlwood on several occasions, and had often met Fred and his wife in town.

And Lillah was governess in their service—governess to little Marion, the sweet child of ten

whose fair hair was tied back with white ribbons, and who called me her "Uncle Edgar."

"How did you know the Northeys were my friends?" I inquired in curiosity.

"They have apparently spoken of you before her," he said. "That is why she knew you were friends."

"And she wishes to see me?"

"Yes. She asks you to go and visit the Northeys. They were only expressing wonder the other day that they had heard nothing of you of late."

I reflected that Fred had asked me down there for Christmas, but having previously accepted an invitation to a house party up in the Highlands, I had therefore to defer my visit.

"And any other message?" I inquired of the man whom Miller had declared to be an expert at the art of imitating the handwriting of others.

"Nothing—except to thank you for the warning you gave to our friend Ralph. I, too, thank you most sincerely, Mr. Laird."

"Both he and Jacobsen escaped safely, I suppose?"

"Yes. Both are in New York just now, disposing of the old Dutchman's stuff."

"And Almond—where is he?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I forgot. You know everything, of course!"

"Not everything," I replied. "I know, how-

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ever, that Jim Almond, Miss Ashcroft's father, heads your very interesting combination," I said, with a smile.

"And as a member of the public you might earn a substantial reward by giving us away to the police."

"I have no wish to do that."

"Because of Iris," he said in a low tone.

"Well, go and see her. She seems most anxious to have a chat with you."

"I will, of course," I replied. "When did you see her?"

"Yesterday. I went down to Horsebridge Station, which, as you know, is about three miles from the Manor, and she met me in a by-road near. I was with her only ten minutes, and then returned to Waterloo."

"And where's Almond?"

"Still abroad, of course. It wouldn't be safe for him to return just now. Things are far too warm, with Miller making inquiries."

"Regarding the Gerrard's Cross affair?" I suggested, as, having gained the departure platform, I invited him into the refreshment-bar.

He only grinned and shrugged his shoulders, saying:

"That is a matter, Mr. Laird, that we need not now discuss."

Ten minutes later we parted, and taking a taxi to Savoy Court, I sent a "wire" to Fred

Northey saying that I was back in town, and would like to run down and spend the week-end with him—for that day was a Thursday.

At nine o'clock that same night Seddon handed me a reply which expressed delight at my message, and urged me to run down on the morrow.

So my man packed my bags, and at a quarter-past eleven o'clock on the following day I left Waterloo for Andover Junction, where I changed upon the branch line, which took me through sleepy old Stockbridge on to Horsebridge Station. There Fred met me in his big red "Mercédès" and drove me over the hills, through the village of King's Somborne, with its squat little church, a place once the residence of John o' Gaunt, and out upon the broad open highway, where, a mile further on, we turned sharp to the right up a steep hill. Into a lovely wooded country, picturesque in all the fresh green of spring, we went, and through a tiny hamlet of homely thatched cottages called Ashley, beyond which we suddenly swung past a lodge and up the long drive that led to Charlwood Manor, a big, long, spacious, seventeenth-century house partly covered with ivy, with pretty, well-kept gardens, and splendid woods beyond.

Mrs. Northey, or Marjorie, as her intimate friends always called her, was standing at the door, and greeted me merrily as I descended.

"Well, Edgar!" she cried, "at last! Fred and I were only talking of you the other day. The last we heard was that you were in Bordighera. The Jacksons, our neighbours over at Sparsholt met you there, and told us."

"I'm delighted you've come, my dear old fellow," cried Fred, a tall, clean-limbed man of forty-five, with a pair of merry dark eyes and slight moustache well trained upwards. He was the owner of one of the most extensive and picturesque estates in the county, and before his father's death had been in the Guards.

In the big oak-panelled dining-room with its high old dresser decorated with some choice old blue English china, luncheon was laid, and we sat down straight away, as it was getting late.

My eyes were searching for Lillah, but in vain.

"Where's little Marion?" I inquired as the man handed me the *hors d'œuvre*.

"Having her lunch with her new governess," replied her mother, a handsome dark-haired woman who looked marvellously young for her age.

"Oh! then Miss Roddis has left you?" I exclaimed in feigned surprise.

"Yes. We've got a new young lady, a Miss Nellie Bond. Marion likes her so much, she is so kind and thoughtful, and so very helpful to me."

"She's quite a success," declared her husband.

"We got her by advertisement, and her references were excellent. She's been abroad a great deal with the family of Baron Haller, the Dutch banker, of The Hague."

"So she speaks decent French, I expect?"

"Perfect," declared Mr. Northey, "and German and Italian also—a most accomplished girl."

"Who are her parents?" I inquired.

"She has no father. Her mother is alive, and lives somewhere up in the Midlands. Her father was a solicitor in Birmingham, it appears, but before his death lost all his money in South African mines. So she had to turn out and earn her own living, poor girl. I always feel sorry for girls placed in such a position."

I smiled within myself. What would my friends say if they knew the truth of who and what their model governess really was!

Luncheon over, we went forth into the big long hall for coffee, and presently the door at the end opened and I saw silhouetted against it Lillah, neat and modest, in a blue serge skirt, with cream blouse, and dark blue cravat.

Before her was little fair-haired Marion, in a sailor dress edged with white, who, on seeing me, danced towards me, crying:

"Hulloa, Uncle Edgar!" taking my hand in welcome.

"Hulloa, dear," I said, "I've been asking after you. Why, what a big girl you grow! I declare if I met you in the street I'd never recognise you! I hope you grow as good as you grow tall."

Whereat the child looked shyly over to her mother, who, beckoning the new governess forward, said:

"Let me introduce you—Mr. Laird—Miss Bond."

Lillah's face never altered a muscle, save, perhaps, that her cheeks went just a trifle pale. She bowed slightly at my greeting, cold and impassive, which showed what perfect control she could exercise over her emotions. A moment later she turned to Mrs. Northey, saying:

"Shall I take Miss Marion through Ashley Wood this afternoon, as you suggested?"

"Yes, I think so," replied the child's mother. "Be back by five, for I daresay she'll like to take tea with her Uncle Edgar."

"Yes, mother," exclaimed the child, delighted. "We'll be back in time. Miss Bond is going to take me to pick blue-bells. There are thousands and thousands in the woods," and then, turning to me, she added, putting up her finger warningly, "If you're very good, Uncle Edgar, I'll bring you home a nice buttonhole to put in your coat—see?"

I smiled, and Lillah's eyes met mine. But only

for a second. She dropped them again, and, placing her hand tenderly upon the child's shoulder, went out.

Truly she acted the part of governess to perfection. But I remembered that it was not the first occasion she had taken children under her charge—if what Mrs. Charlesworth had told me were true.

And yet this was the girl who was suspected by Inspector Miller of killing her lover near Gerrard's Cross—the woman described by the poacher who saw the dastardly crime committed !

I passed the afternoon smoking with my friend the captain, afterwards wandering around the grounds inspecting some improvements he had made, including the erection of a high iron wind-mill for the pumping of water from a Roman well in the vicinity—for Ashley was an important Roman camp on the straight old road from Winchester to Salisbury, parts of which are in use to this day.

Traces of the camp lay at the side of the house—a large mound below which were still deep ditches and high embankments ; an impregnable fortress, in those long-ago days, coeval with the bronze coins of Constantine so often turned up by the plough in the neighbourhood.

The woods, full of game, ran up quite close to the house, while the lanes around were lined with trees, now bright in their spring green, but

in summer meeting overhead and forming long leafy tunnels. Truly there was no more picturesque spot in the whole of the south of England than that undulating country around Charlwood.

At last we re-entered the hall, where we found Mrs. Northey presiding over the tea-table, chatting with Miss Bond, while little Marion held an unconscionably large posy of primroses and bluebells, ready for my buttonhole.

Approaching me, and tossing her fair hair from her shoulders, she said :

" You've been a very good boy, Uncle Edgar, so I've brought these for you to wear," and she handed me the posy, which I was compelled to place in the lappel of my coat.

The governess, well trained and knowing her place as a menial in the household, said but little during tea. She did not address me once, her conversation being always directed to her sweet little charge or to Mrs. Northey.

" We went through the Forest Walk, down to the Forest of Bere Farm," she explained to her mistress, " and home by the Beacon Hill. The primroses in the forest are simply lovely just now. The whole wood on the other side is simply yellow with them."

" You've never seen that wonderful Roman well down at the Forest of Bere Farm, have you, Edgar ? " asked my friend.

"Never."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "you, who are so fond of antiquities, should see it. You must go. It's over three hundred feet deep, and was in use, it is believed, in the days of Constantine, just as it is to-day."

"I'd be most interested to see it," I said, and then the conversation drifted into another channel.

Not until just as I went up to dress for dinner was I able to get a word with Lillah.

She met me at the top of the staircase, where she had, no doubt, been awaiting me after the dressing-bell, and as I halted for a moment fearful of discovery, she whispered:

"To-morrow at eleven make an excuse to slip away. I will be in the Forest Walk alone. I must see you," and then she slipped along the corridor, and from my sight.

CHAPTER XX

THE DEAD MAN'S NAME

I SAW Lillah no more that night. After dinner I played billiards with my host, and then turned in.

Fortunately for me, on the following morning at breakfast, Fred Northey said :

" I'll have to be the greater part of the morning with Walker. We've got to drive over to a farm out beyond Compton, and I daresay I shan't be back till twelve. But you'll be able to amuse yourself, Edgar, old chap, won't you ? "

" Of course," I said. " I know my way about quite well."

Walker was his steward, and I knew he often went over the estate with him.

" I have to drive into King's Somborne, Mr. Laird," said my hostess. " I'm taking Marion for the air. It's such a beautiful morning. Would you like to come with us ? "

I replied that I preferred a walk, for I wanted exercise, so at ten o'clock I found myself left entirely to my own devices, and after writing a

letter in my host's cosy library, I took my hat and stick, and strolled out into Ashley Wood.

The morning was glorious, with the warm sun glinting through the thin bright green foliage, and falling on a carpet of primroses, violets, and blue-bells. Through the great wood, stretching as it did for several miles, were a number of paths, and as I turned into it, three ways branched out before me. I took the left-hand one, which was that indicated by Lillah, and walked on with the birds, awakened after the long silence of winter, singing brightly above, while ever and anon a pheasant would rise at my feet, and the sweet odour everywhere was the odour of the English forest, the forest which somehow is unlike any other forest in the whole wide world.

I suppose I had gone nearly half a mile when I saw before me through the grey lichen-covered tree trunks a female figure, which in an instant I knew to be hers.

I uttered a cry of welcome, whereupon she waved her hand gladly. Then I hurried forward, and a few moments later we were standing with hands clasped.

"Lillah!" I cried, addressing her for the first time by her Christian name. "Why have you been so long silent?"

"Under compulsion," was her response. "I was unable to communicate with you."

"But you wrote to Mrs. Charlesworth to forward your letters," I said, as I strolled at her side along that soft path carpeted with moss.

"Yes, I know," she said. "But, well, after I left you I was compelled to move hither and thither. I had a very trying time."

"Because of Ralph Rushton?" I suggested.

"Yes. Beware of him," she answered, her gaze wavering. "I feared lest he might carry out his threat. And I feared to write to you after Turin, for I knew not into whose hands the letter might fall."

By the slight sigh that escaped her and the trembling of the eyelids, I saw that the recollections of those dark days were painful to her.

"Lillah," I said very calmly, still looking straight into her face. "Forgive me for what I am about to say. But I know who and what your father is—Jim Almond, the man wanted by Scotland Yard on half a dozen serious charges—the man who is leader of one of the most daring and dangerous gangs of thieves in Europe."

"Ah!" she cried, covering her face with her hands, "I feared it—I feared that you would soon discover the truth. How you must hate me! I know you must—for I have deceived you!"

"I do not hate you," I declared, placing my hand tenderly upon her arm. "On the con-

trary, I have known the truth from the very first ; yet I resolved to be your friend."

" And assuredly you have been, Mr. Laird," she declared, looking at me with a strange, half-frightened glance. " My father has told me how you found Rushton and warned him of the intentions of the police."

" You have seen your father, then ? "

" Yes—I spent a quiet fortnight with him, hiding in the house of a friend of ours in a suburb of Vienna—a man in the same profession as my father. I begged him to return to England, but he declares that it is far too dangerous."

" And then you saw Mrs. Northey's advertisement and answered it ? "

" Yes. I deemed that to take a situation as governess would be a good means of effacing my identity, for while the police were searching for me all over the Continent, as they no doubt are, I would be living right under their very noses."

" But why are the police in search of you ? "

I inquired, suddenly.

In an instant she saw that she had made an injudicious declaration, therefore she stammered:

" Well, that's only my suspicion. If they want to find my father they'll probably first seek to discover me and then watch my movements. That is their usual mode." She carefully avoided any reference to that strange affair at Gerrard's Cross, though I recollected at that

moment her pale nervousness when Dick Duncan had so unconsciously referred to it while we were crossing the Channel.

I did not press her for further explanation, but made inquiry into the manner in which she had obtained a reference to satisfy my hostess.

"Oh—that's quite easy," she laughed. "We have a friend who passes under the name of Baron Haller. He's really a receiver of stolen property, like Jacobsen in Utrecht. He always gives me a reference when I require one."

"Then you've been a governess before?"

"Yes—always against my will," was her low, half-whispered reply, as she walked with her gaze set straight before her.

"With a definite object, I suppose?"

Her face relaxed into a mysterious smile.

"I have entered more than one family at my father's request—in order—well, in order to ascertain its secrets," she said. "And some that I have discovered have been strange ones indeed. Both Rushton and Pontifex have brought blackmail to a fine art."

"I hardly follow your last sentence," I remarked.

"Well, suppose I enter a family, it is the easiest thing in the world to become the *confidante* of my mistress, learn her secrets—those she has from her husband, for instance—and then pass them on to Rushton."

"And you have done this!" I exclaimed, in a voice half of reproach.

"Under compulsion," she cried. "I have not, I swear to you, Mr. Laird, ever done it of my own free will. To me it is hateful work. Ah!" she sighed. "The women who have revealed their secrets to me have, alas! had good cause to curse me afterwards."

"Then Rushton and Pontifex—with your father as director of it all—have squeezed these unfortunate ladies of money—eh?"

"Of all they possessed sometimes—even their jewels. Most of my sex cling to their good name as their most cherished possession."

"Yes," I said, "it is astonishing how weak a woman becomes when she desires to avoid a scandal."

"True," she declared. "And it is equally astonishing that never once have I been suspected of conveying the truth to those men—those two 'spiders' of society," she added with set teeth.

"Your father countenanced it," I remarked in a low voice, looking into her pale thoughtful countenance.

"Alas! I know," she said, sighing. "I have tried my utmost to induce him to give up this life of deceit and double-dealing, but all in vain. He has enough money for his wants, yet he refuses to listen to me. He says he has had

excitement and adventure all his life and must have it still."

"Well," I remarked, "I hope your present object is not to lead Mrs. Northey into any trap set by those blackmailers."

"Hardly that," she answered. "I am here only as a harbour of refuge—because I know that as a governess, earning my living respectably, I am more likely to evade detection. But, ah! if my father would only return!—if only we could live happily and quietly as we did for three whole months last year."

"You're devoted to your father, Iris—for I may as well call you by your right name," I said.

"Yes," was her unhesitating reply. "Though he has brought me up to be his assistant in his various nefarious schemes, yet he has ever been a good father to me, and he feels my loss, I know, just as keenly as I feel the loss of him."

"But he'll return," I said. "Surely he'll return?"

"No. The police are now too hot upon his trail. A fortnight ago, in Trieste, he was recognised, and only managed to escape by getting on board a steamer for Zara, in Dalmatia. His photograph is circulated everywhere. He's now in Montenegro, I think, up at Cettigne."

"Rushton is in New York."

"I know," she said. "I heard from Mr. Pontifex how, in return for my liberty, you had

saved him from arrest. How can I sufficiently thank you for that? Though my father does not know you personally, he asked me to tell you that he trusts you will allow him to meet you one day and thank you personally for the manner in which you got me secretly across the Channel after——” and she hesitated, without concluding her sentence.

“After the Gerrard’s Cross affair, you mean,” I added very slowly, my gaze fixed upon hers the while.

She started quickly. In an instant her countenance had blanched to the lips.

“I—I don’t quite follow you,” she gasped. “I—I—— But what do you know of that——?”

“Only one thing, Iris,” I answered boldly. “I know that on the morning of the tragedy you wrote a cryptic message. Do you not recollect that you wrote it in the train while I watched you? That message,” I added, meaningly, “was found upon the dead man Paul.”

“Yes,” she cried, a strange light in her eyes. “I know, Mr. Laird. I read in the newspapers the evidence given at the inquest. I was described. They declared that I—that I—I killed Paolo Pauletti!”

“No,” I said in quick sympathy, “don’t let us discuss it. I see you are upset, Iris. Remember, I am always your friend. If you deem it wise to make me your confidant, then rest

assured that I shall never betray you. I am, I hope, a man of honour, and my word is ever my bond."

"How can I possibly doubt you, Mr. Laird?" she exclaimed. "Had you wished, you could have given me up to the police long ago. Sometimes when I've sat alone and pondered I have wondered why you have not—why you have been so very good to me—a girl who met you as a perfect stranger!"

"I repeat, I am your friend," I said. "Friendship grows imperceptibly, and out of nothing. It is often as unaccountable as love, or as prejudice."

"But surely, knowing what you do concerning me, you would be only prejudiced against me! Indeed, what I have just told you regarding my own unforgivable deeds would be sufficient to prejudice me as an adventuress in the eyes of any honourable man!"

"Nothing prejudices friend against friend," I declared. "I made a promise to you, Iris—a promise of friendship, which I hope I shall always respect. My sole desire is to see you cleared of this black suspicion upon you—to see you and your father—whom I have not the pleasure of knowing—leading an upright and honourable life."

"Ah!" she cried, breaking suddenly into hot tears, "I, too, have the same goal before me. I

hate it all. I only want peace and security with dear old dad—a born adventurer, it is true, but one of the best fathers in the world. I know, Mr. Laird, when you meet him he'll interest you. He has so many quaint stories of his wild adventurous life in New Zealand and in South Africa."

"I'm sure we shall be friends," I said. "I only regret that he clings to his old and dishonourable profession."

Then, for some distance we walked on through that beautiful wood, where the new foliage was budding everywhere, where trees were white with blossom, and where the silence was broken only by the sweet songs of the birds and the spring-song of the cuckoo.

Both our hearts were, I think, too full for mere words.

At last, after a glance into her pale, hard-set face, I urged her to confide in me.

"Ah! Mr. Laird. Heaven knows, I—I've done my best to make dad give it all up. I only hope that he will. Hunted as I am by those I believed to be my friends, as well as by the police, mine is a life unbearable. I long for the peace and respectability such as is the lot of other girls—to be free to earn my own living, as I am earning it now."

"But surely that fellow Rushton has given you your freedom?" I cried. "He promised me! What have you further to fear?"

"I—I fear what I anticipated when we met at Feltham," she answered slowly, in accents of anguish, after a long and painful pause.

"But you have given me to understand that you are innocent of having any hand in the young Italian's death!" I exclaimed quickly.

"Yes—but—I—I told you——"

Those halting words froze upon her lips. Her soft, dimpled cheeks were pale as death, and her thin white hand clenched in a nervous emotion that she strove in vain to repress. Within her heaving breast had arisen a veritable tumult of agony. At that moment of her bitter remorse she was about to confess to me the actual truth.

I had paused, holding her soft, trembling hand in mine. I pressed it in my own.

"Speak, Iris," I said, softly. "Speak—I—I am ever your friend."

But scarcely had those words left my lips when something happened—an incident startling and unexpected.

I realised that we were not alone!

CHAPTER XXI

THE SIN AND THE STRANGER

FOR a moment we were so surprised that neither of us could utter a word.

We had imagined ourselves quite alone in that delightful glade, yet we had, it seemed, been watched by a tall, sparely-built, well-dressed young man who, stepping suddenly forward from some bushes, faced us.

My neat-waisted little companion uttered an involuntary cry as she apparently recognised him—distinctly a cry of terror. Her hand sought mine convulsively, while at the same time all light died from her beautiful face.

The man was, I judged, about twenty-eight or so, fair-haired, clean-shaven, and wearing a well-cut homespun suit, and golf-cap, and carrying in his hand a short stick. He looked strong, athletic, and from the dust upon his boots it was apparent that he had walked a considerable distance.

“ Ah ! ” he laughed, sarcastically, “ so I see that you recognise me, Miss Lillah ! I’m like a ghost risen from the past—eh ? ”

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I looked at my companion for some explanation, but she afforded me none. She only held her breath, while in her staring eyes was a look of dismay and terror.

The meeting was, for her, an unpleasant one, undoubtedly. But in a moment I resolved to "face the music," whatever it might be.

"I don't know, sir, by what right you address this lady!" I cried in resentment.

"I haven't the pleasure of knowing who or what you are," he replied; "but I have every right to address Miss Lillah Ashcroft. I presume you are one of her precious father's gang—and if you are I address you also," he added defiantly.

"Do you wish to insult me?" I cried, advancing fiercely towards the fellow.

"Not in the least. The day before yesterday while Miss Ashcroft was driving in Northey's governess-cart in Winchester I recognised her. So this morning I've come over to have a few serious words with her."

Again Iris uttered a cry, more like a groan. She was trembling, her face ashen pale, her lips parted.

"Perhaps," he added, "she will deny all knowledge of me. But"—and he raised his finger to her—"but I think you will be compelled to admit that her attitude is that of a guilty woman."

"Miss Ashcroft," I said, turning to her, "I

think you had better return to the house, and leave me to interview this gentleman"; I accentuated the final words of the sentence.

"No," cried the stranger, "let her hear me. It was she who killed my dear friend, Count Paolo Pauletti!"

The woman beside me covered her white face with her hands, and burst into a flood of tears. Then we all three stood silent.

In face of her terror and emotion, I knew not what to say.

"She does not deny it!" the man exclaimed in a hard, vengeful voice. "Because she cannot. The truth is too plain. There was an eyewitness!"

"Come," I said in a voice of sympathy, "don't remain here, Miss Ashcroft. Go back to the house for the present."

Truth to tell, the situation was so embarrassing and so unexpected that I had been taken completely aback. Surely her position was one of extreme peril.

"Let me remain," she urged in a low, hoarse voice. "Let me hear his accusation."

"I repeat that you, Lillah Ashcroft, killed poor Paul because of jealousy! You loved him!"

"It is true," was her faltering answer, "I did love him."

"I'll not allow you to remain here," I cried, fearing lest she might commit herself by some

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further admission. "Please leave us, Miss Ashcroft. I beg of you to do so."

"She may return to the Northeys," exclaimed the stranger, "but she will not retain her liberty for long," and he turned his back upon her in undisguised disgust and loathing.

"But, Mr. Whatton," she protested faintly, "you surely might have spoken to me alone!"

"No, I wished to speak before a third person—to expose your perfidy!"

Again I begged her to leave us. Nay, my appeal now took the form of a demand, and at last very reluctantly her head sank upon her breast, she turned and with unsteady gait retraced her steps by the way we had come.

"Now, sir!" I exclaimed, as soon as she had turned the bend among the grey tree-trunks, "whatever you have to say, you will, perhaps, say it before me."

But the stranger merely smiled.

"I cannot see that you have anything to do with differences existing between Miss Ashcroft and myself," was his resentful reply.

"Then this is merely a difference between you two?"

"Call it what you like," he said impatiently. "I have spoken the truth. That girl murdered my best friend."

"You have proof of it—eh?" I asked as quietly as I could.

"Ample proof. You don't know her as I do, evidently."

At once I saw that if I assumed relationship with Iris I might obtain some information from this angry stranger, so I replied :

"I think I ought to know her well, considering that I'm her cousin."

"Oh! I wasn't aware of that," he said in a changed tone. "I imagined you to be one of the associates of Pontifex, Rushton, and the man Ashcroft, whose other name is Almond, and whose 'aliases,' I suppose, are a hundred."

"Tell me the whole circumstances," I said. "Possibly I can assist you."

"You will, of course, shield your pretty cousin."

"Not if she is found guilty of this terrible crime which you allege."

I saw that he was greatly incensed against her, and that his spirit was that of fierce revenge. But as we strolled slowly together I gradually got him into a calmer mood, and after I had told him my name he replied that he was George Whatton, that he was a clerk in the London City and Provincial Bank, and was now stationed at the Winchester branch. While on his stool at the bank he had seen Lillah Ashcroft drive down the High Street with little Marion, and on inquiry learned that she was the governess of the Northeys of Charlwood.

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"And how did you become acquainted with her?" I asked, adding: "Tell me all you can, as perhaps I may be able to furnish some other details."

"But you are her cousin," he remarked.

"And just the reason why I should know more of the affair than you," was my quick response.

"Well," he said, "my youth was spent in Florence, where I had a boy friend, Count Paolo Pauletti, the son of the great Tuscan landowner and Senator. We were afterwards at Haileybury together, and while he inherited his father's splendid estates, with palaces in the Via Bardi, in Florence, and the Palazzo Pauletti in the Corso in Rome, I, owing to a change in the fortunes of my family, was compelled to adopt a commercial career and become a bank clerk, first at the head office and afterwards at the Shepherd's Bush branch. Paolo, my dear friend, who was almost a brother, preferred England to Italy, and was frequently in London, spending much of his time with me. He was wealthy and good-looking, had served his time in one of the crack cavalry regiments in Italy, and was much sought after by mothers with marriageable daughters—those wizen-faced old marchesas and contessas who hawk about their daughters in summer at Rimini, Livorno, Viareggio, and Salzomaggiore. I don't know whether you know

Italy? If you do, you'll know the painted, powdered, grotesque old women I mean."

"Yes," I said, with a smile, "I know Italy very well, and I recognise the type you describe."

"Well," he went on, after a brief pause, "I must now make a confession. Paul and I went about London a good deal together, and I did not like to allow him to pay always. Hence gradually, by slow degrees, I got into debt. At first I did not feel the burden very great, but, as you may imagine, my salary at the bank was not large, and one day I awoke to find myself very much in 'queer street.' Two men of whom I had borrowed money were pressing for repayment, and threatened proceedings which, I knew, must result in my discharge from the bank. I became greatly worried, yet I could not bring myself to tell Paul the truth. Just at this time, about eighteen months ago, Paul and I were one evening in the American bar at the 'Savoy,' when we got into conversation with a stranger, with whom we eventually exchanged cards—a gentleman named Mr. Philip Pontifex."

"I know him," I remarked briefly.

"Well, we became friends, and it was afterwards evident that, before making my acquaintance, he had ascertained my calling. One day, about a month later, after Paul and I had been introduced to his friend Ashcroft and his pretty

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daughter Lillah and Ralph Rushton, who had a cosy flat in Shaftesbury Avenue, I dined with him in a private room at the 'Globe' in Coventry Street. And there he placed a proposal before me. Over the dessert he told me that he knew I was hard up, and sympathised with me. Then he gradually unfolded to me a plan—an ingenious plan—and said that if I supplied certain things, exact information, some printed forms used by the bank, some of the bank's note-paper, and a specimen of the business signature of the manager of the Shepherd's Bush branch, he would give me five hundred pounds."

"And you did so?"

"What else could I do? I was in desperate straits!"

"You couldn't resist the temptation—eh?"

"No. To cut a long story short, I obtained all that he wanted, and a week later, when I handed them over in his furnished rooms down at Chelsea, I received the five hundred pounds he promised."

"Well?"

"Probably you read in the papers what happened—how one branch of the bank, a fortnight later, was made the victim of a huge fraud; the swindlers—that is, Pontifex, Rushton, and Ashcroft, or Almond, as is his real name—got clear away to the Continent with twelve thousand odd pounds. Nobody suspected me. Indeed,

since that time I've been promoted and sent down to Winchester, where I still am."

"That's a confession," I remarked, "an open confession."

"I know," he said, "but I have still more to tell you. Pontifex, crafty scoundrel that he was, made it a condition that I should not cash any of the notes he gave me for one month. Then, three days before the month expired, he wrote warning me not to attempt to put them into circulation, as they were the proceeds of a previous robbery in Glasgow and had been stopped."

"Then the swindlers actually swindled you!" I cried, realising now the reason of his intense anger.

"Yes—the blackguards!"

"That was distinctly dishonourable," I said grimly. "But what of your friend Pauletti?"

"Ah! that is the point. When I found I had been swindled I went to him and made full confession. He was then staying at 'Claridge's,' and I recollect the evening when, in his sitting-room, I told him the truth. He made no remark. He only ground his teeth and clenched his hands. His attitude was so curious that I asked him the reason. Then he told me. He had fallen deeply in love with Ashcroft's daughter, and had been in the habit of going down to see her at the small house her father occupied

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out at Hanworth, near Feltham outside London. There, one night, he had played cards with Rushton and Pontifex, and Lillah's father, and had lost nine hundred pounds. Until I made my confession he had no idea that our friends were expert thieves. My confession greatly upset him, and—and I fear, alas!" he added in a hard, strained voice, "I fear it was the cause of his losing his life, poor fellow!"

"How?" I asked quickly.

"Listen, and I will tell you."

CHAPTER XXII

RELATES AN AMAZING STORY

WE had halted together, and my new acquaintance stood leaning upon his stick as he faced me.

"Poor Pauletti fell into the net they cleverly spread for him," he said. "It was I who, alas! introduced him to Rushton, who, in time, introduced him to Ashcroft and Lillah. At that time he believed them all to be persons well off, and highly respectable—until I was the first to fall into the trap. Then I realised when too late how cleverly I had been misled, and with what consummate art and cunning the bank had been robbed. You recollect the case?"

"Of course," I said. "It was in all the papers, and declared to be one of the cleverest bank frauds of modern times. The police possessed not the slightest clue."

"Except that they knew the thieves must have been supplied with information by someone in the bank itself," he laughed. "But with a big bank like ours, with so many branches and

such a large staff, they found it impossible to pick upon the right person—myself.”

“But your friend, the young count?” I said.

“How did they enmesh him?”

“First, Lillah cast her web about him. He fell over head and ears in love with her, while she—curse her—pretended to love him.”

“She did love him,” I protested, speaking very quietly.

“Love him!” he echoed impatiently. “Love him, when it was her hand that killed him!”

“This is surely not proved,” I exclaimed. “I know that the poacher told an extraordinary story at the inquest, but I consider it very unreliable.”

“It is the truth—without a doubt,” he declared quickly. “Since Paul’s death I have ascertained that this gang of vampires—these suckers of blood—obtained from him nearly half he possessed, by Rushton representing that he held a controlling interest in a new and marvellous invention—one which, if it really had existed, would revolutionise the whole civilised world.”

“And what’s that?” I inquired. “We hear of very strange discoveries nowadays.”

“The invention of a weapon that would abolish war!” he replied. “So marvellous was it alleged to be that Paul, to secure control of the discovery from the hands of Rushton, and

intending to present it to the Italian nation, sold half he possessed and paid for it in hard cash, but exactly how much I cannot yet quite discover."

"But tell me," I urged, much interested. "A man does not part with money until he sees an invention put to the test. How does it propose to abolish war?"

He placed his hand in his breast pocket, and from his wallet took a typewritten prospectus, saying, "This was found only recently among Paul's papers at his home in Florence. Listen to what it says:

"Nations may build 'Dreadnoughts' and airships against each other, but another far more powerful weapon has been discovered for the warfare of the future. The cannon, the torpedo, the rifle, and the sword are powerless against this weapon that science has just discovered. Briefly, there has been found a mode by which Hertzian 'waves' may be controlled and directed, a fact which, to those acquainted with their force and power, will be sufficiently appalling. Hertzian 'waves' are called after Heinrich Hertz, who, about the year 1888, found that it was possible to control in a greater or lesser degree the magnetic current about us. These 'waves' move along in corkscrew fashion,

but no scientist up to this present discovery has ever been able to control and direct them.

" Past experiments demonstrated that this invisible force could penetrate a stone wall four feet thick, yet they were uncontrollable. For practical purposes the waves are spirals of moving invisible flame, which I can now guide over the distance of ten miles. Armies and navies can now be annihilated by the unseen forces of nature without the chance of raising a finger in self-defence. Two or three men sitting at these newly-devised instruments can direct a group of waves through the air towards an advancing fleet. The waves will strike the ships, run along the metal portions of them as flame will run along a train of petrol, while all the while the ship will be giving off electric sparks as from a huge battery. In a few seconds, indeed, sparks would be emitted from everywhere, all the shells on board would burst, the powder magazines would explode, and the biggest battleship ever built would be sent into the air in atoms. And not only at sea, but on land also these destructive waves may be sent into any fortress or powder-magazine at the will of the operator touching a single keyboard. The invisible power now under control can pierce the walls of the strongest fortress, or will strike down an

army like the invincible finger of death itself, twisting guns and swords into a shapeless mass. Thus this most powerful yet invisible force known to science may be directed at will, and the future peace of the world now lies in the hands of a single man."

"And I suppose the whole story of this invention is an utter fabrication?" I remarked.

"No," he said. "That's what shows how clever and cunning were these scoundrels. While this statement has, I found, been copied, with some alteration, from an article which appeared in a magazine, yet it is a fact that a French *savant* has actually been able to partially control Hertzian waves with most astounding results. All that is stated regarding the potentialities of the invention is correct. But the invention is not yet perfect. Paul was, I have since discovered, shown some of this Frenchman's experiments, the inventor believing that the Count was in treaty to finance him, whereas Rushton and his friends were declaring that they were the holders of the whole discovery, and that whoever purchased it would be instrumental in putting an end to war, for no navy would put to sea, nor would an airship dare to rise, knowing that at any moment the dread invisible waves would annihilate it in a single second."

"And Pauletti swallowed the bait?"

"Yes—and lost his life into the bargain, poor fellow!" ejaculated Whatton.

"But did he tell you nothing of his secret dealings with these men?"

"Not a word. I was in entire ignorance of it until his friends in Italy discovered how depleted was the dead man's purse, how he had sold his land in secret, and how he had made mysterious payments of big sums to an Englishman named Clarke, who had an account at the Credit Lyonnais, in Paris, and who, I have established, was no other than Ralph Rushton."

"Do the police know all this?" I asked.

"No. But they soon will know," he said.

"Only three days ago Paolo's younger brother, Giacomo, who has arrived in England, came down to see me at Winchester and showed me several letters from Rushton which had been found in the dead man's writing-table in the Palazzo Pauletti in Florence, together with that remarkable and astounding document I have just read to you."

"But if this is the truth, where has all the money gone?" I asked.

"Not into Almond's pockets, I think," was Whatton's reply. "He is leader of the gang, no doubt, but I believe he is not at all well off, for Rushton and Pontifex have taken the greater share of the spoils."

"They must be wealthy men," I remarked, recollecting how I had given the first-named warning to escape.

"Yes," the young man said, "they managed to squeeze a good many thousands out of poor patriotic Paul."

"Thousands which they must have concealed somewhere."

"They have fat banking accounts abroad, I expect," said the dead man's friend. "Men of their stamp, if at all successful, amass great fortunes. Then, as soon as they are wealthy, the police experience the greatest difficulty in bringing them to justice. The long pocket tells, as it does in everything else in this world."

"Yes," I admitted; "but you haven't made it at all plain why your friend should have been enticed to that lonely spot near Gerrard's Cross, and killed in a manner so secret that even the doctors cannot say with any degree of certainty how the fatal issue was caused. Had he come to the end of his money?"

"Not by any means," was Whatton's reply. "There are letters in existence to show that at the very time of his death he was arranging to pay this mysterious Mr. Francis Clarke, of the Rue St. Honoré, a further sum of five thousand pounds."

"Then, if he was still interested in the bogus

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invention and was still financing it, why should he have been assassinated? Men such as Almond and his friends don't usually kill the 'goose that lays the golden egg.' They're far too clever for that."

"That's just my argument. I allege that the girl Lillah killed him because she was jealous of his attentions to another woman," he declared.

"Have you any basis for such a theory?" I asked him very seriously.

"Yes," was his quick reply. "In due course I shall present my facts."

"In order to convict her—eh?"

"Certainly."

I was silent for some moments. I realised that the situation was now full of grave peril. Indeed, I did not know whether Iris, so suddenly confronted by one of her father's victims, had not already made her way out of the neighbourhood.

"But," I exclaimed at last, "has it not occurred to you that, having realised that Pontifex had induced you to become a traitor to the bank, they expected that you would confess to your most intimate friend, the Count. Then he, realising that the whole invention was a fraud, would in turn inform the police. Would not fear of that be a sufficient incentive for those unscrupulous persons to endeavour to get him

out of the way by the most mysterious means possible ? ”

“ I have already fully considered such a contingency, but it is not one that can be accepted,” was his prompt response.

“ If Paolo had given information to the police, Pontifex would have, in turn, at once given me away as the person who supplied the specimen signature and other things to him. Indeed, when my friend told me how he had been cheated at cards I pointed out to him that any information he gave could only reflect on myself, his friend. Hence he promised to say nothing. But, of course, I had no idea at that time of the purchase of the invention.”

“ So you believe that the gang knew that the Count dared not give information against them, lest you should be arrested with them—eh ? ”

“ That is my firm belief,” was his reply. “ No,” he went on. “ Paolo was killed by that girl with the sweet, innocent face—the girl who kissed him upon the lips at the moment when she struck him the fatal blow.”

“ But, according to the doctors, no blow was struck.”

“ I know the truth,” declared the man before me. “ And I will prove it. Almond and his confederates had no intention that Paul should meet with that sudden and tragic end. On the contrary, it was to their interest that he should

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live, for to them he was a constant source of revenue. No. It was that jealous girl who resolved that, because he had abandoned her—he should die.”

“Then there was really another woman in the case?” I asked anxiously.

“Yes,” he answered. “And the story of the affair was even stranger than that which I’ve just related to you. Ah, when you know the truth,” he cried, “you will hate Lillah Ashcroft with as great and fierce a hatred as I possess towards her—a hatred that can only be appeased by her trial and just punishment for her foul and dastardly crime. She killed my friend—killed him with her own hand!”

CHAPTER XXIII

TOWARDS THE DOOM

"**M**ORE likely Paul Pauletti fell the victim of the private vengeance of one of those men," I said. "I was present at the inquest."

"Then you heard the evidence given by the poacher—the man who actually saw the crime committed? Is not that quite conclusive?"

"No," I replied. Yet Miller's statements flashed across my mind at that moment, and I realised how this man Whatton's theory coincided exactly with that of the renowned investigator of crime.

I could see no way of checkmating him.

"Well," I added, "speak plainly, Mr. Whatton; what are your intentions?"

"I intend, now that I have ascertained that Lillah Ashcroft is masquerading as governess here, to go to the police and tell all that I know."

"And also about your dealings with Pontifex?"

"No," he replied grimly.

"But Pontifex will, no doubt."

"I think not. Neither he nor Rushton has

any love for the girl. They'd only be glad to be rid of her."

"And her father?"

"I don't know anything about him."

"But do you anticipate for one moment that Jim Almond would allow his daughter to be arrested, and perhaps arrested himself, without attempting some reprisals against the man who gave them away? No," I declared, "he's not the sort of man to take an ill turn lying down."

"I don't care," he cried fiercely. "The girl killed my poor friend Paul, and I shall go to the police this very day and tell them everything."

"Then if you do so, Mr. Whatton," I said, speaking very seriously, "I shall also tell my friend, Inspector Miller, at New Scotland Yard, the truth of the London City and Provincial Bank robbery, and you will be placed in the dock at the Old Bailey beside Pontifex, Rush-ton, and perhaps Jim Almond—when they catch him."

He stared at me in blank amazement.

"I—I never saw it in that light," he cried.

"I forgot, when I told you the truth, that you might give information against me! I——"

And he appeared utterly taken aback by the realisation of his own foolish indiscretion.

"I have no desire whatever to do this," I hastened to assure him. "My only object is

the protection of Lillah, and to allow her a fair and just opportunity to clear herself of this terrible charge which you make against her."

"It was made plain at the inquest," he cried. "Besides, if necessary, the woman who held Paul's affections—the woman of whom Lillah had become so insanely jealous—will come forward and make a statement, when the time is ripe."

"What statement?"

"She will tell how Paul discarded Lillah, with whom, at first, he was so frantically in love, on realising that her father was an adventurer, and how he became attracted by her."

"Who is she?"

"A young lady living in London."

"Cannot you be more definite? That's rather vague."

"Her name is Elsie Maxwell."

"And Lillah knew her—eh?"

"She robbed Lillah of her lover."

"But," I said, "do you recollect that there was found a certain cryptic message—one that has, I believe, defied all efforts to decipher it?"

"Yes. That message was from Lillah. The pair used a secret code for communicating with each other. To me it is quite plain, and is even further corroborative of the poacher's evidence. She made that secret appointment with him for one sole object—revenge."

"If we could but read that cipher message a great deal would, no doubt, be explained," I remarked.

"She alone could furnish the key," he said.

"But that she will never do, depend upon it."

"I don't see why she should not."

"Not if she is innocent. But I contend that everything, even to the finding of that secret message, points to her guilt."

"Well," I said at length, "I sincerely trust, Mr. Whatton, that you will, for the present, at any rate, retain your theories regarding the mysterious affair to yourself. If you do not, then I shall most certainly act as I have said."

"I intend to speak," he cried, suddenly angry again, "and you shall not stop me!"

"I shall speak also," I replied very calmly. "Her will be pleased—very pleased, I am sure, to be able to clear up the great bank fraud."

"And—and you'd ruin me!" he gasped, pale at the thought of betrayal.

"As you would ruin a defenceless girl, whose only fault lies in the possession of a disreputable father."

"She's a thief, like her father," he declared quickly.

"But she loved your friend, the Count. You admitted that," I said. "You told me that it

was he who turned from her on discovering that she was the daughter of a thief. If she loved him as you say, she surely had no hand in betraying him to her father's confederates ! ”

“ Perhaps it was pretence of love.”

“ Then pretence of love would not lead her to such a crime of jealousy as you allege,” I declared.

We had turned back, by the way, and had come along what was known as the Forest Drive, and were nearly at the edge of the beautiful wood with its carpet of spring flowers.

“ Come,” I said, after some further argument, “ let us unite, Mr. Whatton, in endeavouring to solve the mystery of your poor friend's tragic end. Act carefully and without rashness, and we may yet succeed where the police have failed.”

“ But the truth is so plain. It——”

“ Pardon me, the truth is anything but plain,” I interrupted. “ True, Pontifex and Rushton behaved like blackguards to you in paying you for your services with stolen notes, yet, after all, have you not some little satisfaction in knowing that you have not profited by the betrayal of your trust ? ”

“ I deeply regret it all. I was a fool ! ” he cried, “ and I have long ago repented. Ah ! had I but summoned courage to tell Paul of my embarrassed finances, I should never have

been led into that trap those blackguards so cunningly baited for me."

"Well," I said, "we have either to be enemies, Mr. Whatton—or friends. If the latter, we will work together, and endeavour to clear up the mystery as I have for months been constantly trying to do—but, alas! without success."

He hesitated, but by this hesitation I knew that he was inclined to take my advice. Indeed, if he did not, he saw that his own arrest was imminent. In his fierce hatred of Lillah he had, all unconsciously, admitted his own crime.

"Well," he answered at last, "if you will guarantee to behave with perfect impartiality in the matter, I will agree."

"I shall be perfectly impartial. At present, I do not see what motive Lillah had for the committal of the crime."

"I have already explained—it was jealousy."

"May I see this Miss Elsie Maxwell? Will you introduce me to her?"

"She is abroad just now. You shall see her when she returns. Meanwhile, I'm always to be found at the bank at Winchester."

"Very well," I said, "I shall go along, and see what has happened to Miss Lillah. She is evidently desperate now that she believes you intend to denounce her."

And then we shook hands and parted at the cross-ways, he taking the right-hand path which led out across the fields and through Upper Somborne Wood to the high road to Winchester, while I turned in the opposite direction towards the house.

My host had returned, and not finding me, had gone out again, but though I searched I could not find the governess.

"Miss Bond came in about half an hour ago, sir," old Blacker, the butler, replied, "but I fancy she went out again. I noticed that she had changed her dress as she went past the window."

Could she have fled?

I went round the garden frantically, and got one of the maids to search the house—rooms that were *terra incognita* to me. But all was to no purpose.

She had returned, changed her dress—and left!

The only means of getting away, I reflected, was by train from Horsebridge Station to either Andover or Southampton. Therefore I set out by the footpath across the fields, hoping to overtake her.

For nearly two miles I hurried on breathlessly across that pretty undulating country, mostly meadow-land, towards the valley of the Test; when, at last, my eager eyes caught sight

of a figure standing at a stile in the field beyond me.

I shouted, and waved my hand.

Then I ran forward until I was at her side.

"Iris," I cried breathlessly, "what are you doing? Why are you leaving here?"

"How can I stay?" she asked hoarsely, her face changed. "How can I stay—after this morning?"

"Why, certainly!" I cried cheerily. "That fellow, Whatton, is angry with you, but I've effectively closed his mouth. Never fear!"

"Closed his mouth," she echoed, suddenly interested. "How could you do that?"

"It was simple. I threatened that if he said a single word against you I would, in reprisal, betray him to the police."

"Why?"

"Do you remember the big fraud your father and his friends practised on the London City and Provincial Bank not so very long ago?"

"Yes—you mean the affair which Mr. Pontifex engineered over at Shepherd's Bush? My father told me of it afterwards."

"Well," I said, "Whatton was the man who procured the necessary papers and signature from the bank in return for five hundred pounds paid to him by Pontifex!"

She stared at me in blank surprise.

"I never knew that!" she cried. "They

never told me. But they always kept me in the dark as to their dealings with Mr. Whatton and his wealthy friend, young Count Paul Pauletti."

"Your lover, Iris!" I added quietly.

"Yes," she faltered, "my lover. But—but is there no danger?" she asked eagerly. "Will he, now that he has found me, still remain silent? Are you sure of that?"

"Quite positive," I assured her. "Come, return and calm yourself. At present there is no danger. That man who has levelled the grave charge against you is in deadly fear of arrest. For the present I have effectually sealed his lips."

I took her hand in reassurance, urging her to return to the Northeys and remain there in security.

"But that man, Whatton, may tell the police," she said in terror. "A word from him, and I should be under arrest. Is it not better for me to fly, and get back to the Continent? My father is, I have received word, living just now on the island of Corfu, where there is no extradition, and where he is quite safe from arrest. Oh, if I could only rejoin him!"

"You are safer here," I assured her, "safer until the storm has blown over. Take my advice, Iris, and do not attempt to leave the country. Remember the police at the ports

have your photograph, and that to attempt to evade them would be well-nigh impossible."

"But if I went across again by the route you so kindly took me?"

"No; remain here with your good friends the Northeys," I urged. "Only Whatton alone knows that Miss Bond is not your right name, and he dare not speak. He will not trouble you again. I will guarantee that. So come, Iris, let us go back, and let us both forget the unpleasant incident of this morning."

"You are too good to me, Mr. Laird!" she cried, suddenly bursting into tears and turning from me to hide the emotion which she could no longer repress. "You—you have saved me to-day. Shall I confess to you? I will, for besides my dear father, you are my only real friend. I was not on my way to escape when you shouted to me. I—I was on my way to the river—over yonder."

And she pointed to the broad stream that lay on the opposite side of the great meadow.

"To commit suicide!" I said, with a deep sigh.

Whereat she held her head in shame and nodded in the affirmative.

"Why?"

"Because — because," she cried hoarsely. "Oh! can't you see? I cannot face the charge that man has made against me!"

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCERNING ELSIE MAXWELL

TUESDAY came. My week-end visit to Charlwood had concluded, but Fred Northey and his wife pressed me to remain, and, nothing loth, I did so.

I saw but little of the governess. Indeed, she seemed to purposely evade me, fearing, perhaps, that her employers might suspect an undue friendship between us.

Often, as I sat alone or lay awake in the long night hours, I wondered if I was acting correctly in thus trying to shield her and her undesirable associates. I realised that if discovered speaking too much to her I should compromise her in the eyes of my host and hostess, therefore it was perhaps better that she should remain apart from me and treat me with studied coolness each day when we met over the tea-table.

The world to-day has decreed that it is "fast" for a girl to individualise a man as her friend. Yet is not that position thoroughly natural and thoroughly healthy, and the wider recognition given to it the less harm is likely to "befall by

the way"? If the average girl wants to do something which is perfectly harmless in itself, and you tell her she is doing wrong, you make her defiant, and then probably she will "go the pace," and do something that really may be unwise. Half our young people's troubles arise from the fact that we pretend that a man and a girl do not want to do things together, to go to dances, theatres, and entertainments alone. It is our cloaked system of subterfuge which leads to complications.

However, it is not recognised in any country house that the guest should be friendly with the governess. Hence I had to remain content with a daily glimpse of Iris as she handed me my tea in the big hall or in the tent out upon the lawn, for the month of May had opened unduly warm, and afternoon tea was pleasant taken *al fresco*.

Little Marion was often with me, but her governess seldom, if ever, came for her. She seemed to avoid me by every means possible.

After a week I pleaded an excuse to drive into Winchester, and after a look round the splendid old cathedral, I lunched at the "George," the oldest inn in England, and called to see Whatton at the bank in the High Street.

I could only manage to speak a few words in an undertone to him, for other clerks were in the

vicinity. My only object was to reassure him that I was doing my best to unravel the mystery, and thus prevent him acting injudiciously in his impatience.

One afternoon, a week later, Fred and his wife were out calling, therefore I had the governess to pour out my tea, and little Marion to do the honours of the house, which she did with great dignity.

After we had gossiped over the teacups, I sent the child into the garden to pick some flowers for me, and stood with Iris against the old lattice-paned window, which afforded a wide view across to the blue distant hills before Winchester.

"Why have you so avoided me of late?" I asked her, after I had briefly explained my visit to Winchester.

"Because I fear that Mrs. Northey may suspect," was her reply. "Besides—it is better for us both to meet as strangers."

"I have noticed by your face that you are much worried. Why? I assure you there is no danger."

"I'm worried regarding my father," she replied. "He has disappeared from Corfu. I 'wired' to him three days ago to the Hotel St. George, but the hotel people have sent a brief reply, saying that he took a sailing boat over to the Albanian coast a week ago, and did

not return to the boat. The boatman came back on the following day without him."

"Well, one thing is certain," I said. "He wouldn't be arrested in Albania."

"They are fighting there. He may have returned to his old profession of soldiering, which he so loved in South Africa," she suggested.

"But if he had done that he would surely write to you!" I said. "Of course he might find Corfu dull, and prefer the excitement now going on in Albania between the Turks and the revolting tribes."

"He would not likely be arrested there, as you say," she remarked. "But oh, how I wish he'd give it all up, and live in secret at home in England. It would surely be quite easy for him to conceal his identity, as he used to do. Nobody suspects one in a country hamlet, as long as one pays one's way, and goes to church twice on Sundays."

"Yes," I said, "I would like to see you both back together again. Be patient, and you will some day."

She sighed wistfully, gazing far out into the blue distance, away over the broad stretch of pastures and forest eastward. She presented a tragic little figure in her white blouse and short blue serge skirt.

For some time neither of us spoke. At last, placing my hand upon her shoulder, I said:

"Iris, I think I ought to tell you what that man, Whatton, alleges."

She started perceptibly at my words.

"Well?" she asked very slowly, in a blank voice. "What does he allege?"

I paused, fearing to unduly pain her. At last I said:

"He declared that you were jealous—that another woman had secured the affections of Paul Pauletti."

"Another woman!" she cried quickly. "Did he tell you the woman's name?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"Elsie Maxwell."

"That stage girl! It's a lie. He never loved her. Whatton has told you a wilful lie!"

"Then you know this girl Maxwell?"

"Yes. I met her once—at supper at the 'Savoy'—a tall, thin, fair-haired girl, who had a small part in the revival of the Gaiety pieces."

"Then it is untrue that Paul ever loved her?" I asked, looking into her drawn, pained face.

"Absolutely. I know he did not love her," was her reply. "She did her best to capture him, because of his title and money, and he quite realised that. Indeed, he had spoken to me of her, and said that she and her mother were continually asking him to luncheon and dinner, but that he constantly refused."

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"You are absolutely certain that Whatton is mistaken in this surmise of his?"

"Absolutely."

"And Paul loved you—and only you—eh?"

"Of that I am entirely confident."

I was silent. If what she told me was correct, then Whatton's theory of jealousy at once fell to the ground.

"Have you any idea how Paul first became acquainted with this actress, Miss Maxwell?"

"Yes. She was a friend of Pontifex, and he introduced them."

"Ah—as part of the complicated game they were playing—eh?"

"Yes. He and Rushton knew that we had fallen in love with each other, and they feared that if I should learn the *coup* they were contemplating—but of which I was then in ignorance—I might betray them, because of my love for him. Hence they introduced him to the girl Maxwell, hoping that she would supplant me in his affections."

"And she did not," I said. "Why are you so certain she did not?"

"Because, only a week before his death, he wrote to me in Scotland a long letter, in which he expressed the strongest disapproval of her, and of the 'fast' company she kept."

"That letter was not written for the purpose of misleading you, do you think? Remember,

Italians are very impressionable where the fair sex are concerned."

"I know. But if I am certain of one thing in this life, I believe in Paul's fidelity towards me," was her firm answer.

"And you were not jealous of him, as has been alleged?"

"There is no real love without jealousy, Mr. Laird," she said. "I was not unduly jealous—but I confess I loved him."

"Until his death?"

She burst into hot, bitter tears.

"Yes," she sobbed. "Until—until his death!"

"You know what was alleged by that poacher at the inquest?" I went on in a low voice.

"Yes; I—I know."

"The mere act of kissing him could not have caused his death," I remarked, hoping she would make some explanation.

"No," she cried, "but do not let us talk of it, I beg of you!" she added. "I can't bear it, Mr. Laird—indeed, I can't!"

"Forgive me," I said. "I only wished to clear up the point as to whether Paul was really in love with the stage-girl, as Whatton alleges."

"There is absolutely no truth in it," she declared, and I saw by her earnestness of manner that she spoke the truth.

"You said that the girl was a friend of Ponti-

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fex. Had she ever assisted him in any of his schemes ? ”

“ I believe so. I know that she had become engaged to a young American whom Rushton afterwards robbed at cards. It was she who introduced him to Rushton.”

“ Ah ! Then the two men used her as a decoy without a doubt.”

“ Yes,” she replied, “ it would appear so.”

“ And you never had anything to do with her ? ”

“ The only occasion I’ve seen her off the stage was one night, while I was at supper with Paul at the ‘ Savoy.’ We met her with Pontifex in the lounge afterwards, and we sat together over coffee. She struck me as a loud-speaking and rather vulgar, showy girl, who dressed well, and exhibited her frocks to advantage. She had, I noticed, a smiling acquaintance with many of the men there—those men about town who are habitués of the place.”

“ But what I am still uncertain of, Iris, is whether Paul did not meet her clandestinely—unknown to you ? He may have done that, you know.”

“ I will believe nothing against the man who, being dead, cannot defend himself ! ” she cried nobly. “ I loved the poor fellow, and I will always respect his memory.”

“ I admire you for those words,” I said.

"Many a woman is far too prone to allow her suspicions to run away with her, and to invent circumstances that never existed. You loved and trusted Paul Pauletti; therefore why should you doubt his honour and uprightness when he is, alas! no more? To me it seems quite feasible, as you have suggested, that he was introduced to Elsie Maxwell for the purpose of putting you asunder. They feared you then—as they fear you now."

"Ah! They do not fear me. Rushton is silenced only for the time being, while Pontifex is ready, at any moment, to deprive me of my liberty."

"And by so doing would lose his own," I added. "These men do not appear to realise that, now I have entered their remarkable combination and ascertained its secrets, I—an outsider—hold them in the hollow of my hand!"

"Ah, no!" she cried, in quick apprehension. "Do not lift a finger against them, Mr. Laird. Recollect that my father would suffer if you did. They would give him away at once, and the police would have the satisfaction of laying hands upon Jim Almond—so long wanted—at last."

"Trust me, Iris," I said, taking her hand, "I promise you I will do nothing without your knowledge and consent. I only intended to point

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out that, in me, these blackguards who are your enemies, have a fierce, indomitable opponent."

At that moment the door at the end of the hall opened, and we had just time to spring apart, ere Blacker, the grey-haired old servant, entered with a card upon his salver.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," he said.

I read the name, and held my breath.

I handed the card to the governess, and she, glancing at it, turned white as death, gripping the back of a chair for support, else she would have staggered and fallen.

She looked as though she had been dealt a blow.

"I will see the gentleman in a moment, Blacker," I managed to stammer.

"Very well, sir. He's in the drawing-room," replied the old man, bowing, and no doubt wondering at Miss Bond's sudden and unaccountable agitation, he went out.

Then I stood utterly confounded. The net was fast closing round.

Tragedy had, indeed, knocked at the door of Charlwood.

CHAPTER XXV

FOR A WOMAN'S LIFE

AS I opened the door of the big old-fashioned drawing-room, with its four long windows, and furniture covered with bright chintzes—a typical country-house drawing-room—a tall, burly figure in dark grey tweeds rose to meet me—Inspector Miller.

“Good morning, Meester Laird!” he exclaimed in his brusque manner, and with that marked Polish accent. “I’m sorry if I’ve disturbed you, but I heard you were here, and I’ve come to ask you two or three rather pointed questions. I know you’ll excuse me. It’s my duty, as you know.”

“Well, Miller, what is it you want to know?” I inquired, a trifle impatiently, I fear. I realised the deadly peril of Iris now that Miller was actually under the same roof.

“I’m still on that case which interested you so much—the affair at Gerrard’s Cross,” he replied.

“Well?”

“Well, you recollect what I told you about

the girl who, no doubt, is guilty of the crime—Iris Almond."

"Yes," I said, feebly. "Have you found her?"

"I have," was his reply, as he stood looking me straight in the face. "And I have come to tell you that you haven't treated me at all fairly in this matter, Mr. Laird. My information shows that it was by your aid she escaped from England after the crime, and that by your help she was able to conceal herself so well on the Continent. The French police have been making diligent inquiry, and that is what they report to me."

I confess that I was utterly taken aback by the great detective's allegation. But next second I resumed my calmness, and asked:

"I presume you intend to arrest her, Miller?"

"That certainly is my intention," he replied.

"As you are well aware, she is living in this house as governess, under the name of Miss Bond. The lodge-keeper told me that she went out a couple of hours ago. Perhaps that's fortunate, as we can talk before she returns."

My heart gave a leap. Miller had been told that Iris had not returned. The lodge-keeper had seen her go forth and she had evidently re-entered the grounds by the unfrequented by-road that came up the hill from Ashley Wood. If Iris was only smart she might make her

escape—that was, if I could delay my unwelcome visitor. I could not, however, call her. I could not, in any way, communicate with her. Therefore it only remained to be seen whether, knowing of Miller's presence, she would make a dash for liberty. I held my breath in keen anxiety.

I endeavoured to affect unconcern, but with sinking heart I saw that Miller had become amused.

"I confess, Meester Laird, that you entirely misled me," he exclaimed. "I had no idea whatever that you were friendly with Iris Almond, or perhaps I would not have told you what I did. Yet I only spoke the truth, and I tell you, much as I respect you, that it's a matter for deep regret that you've got yourself mixed up with Jim Almond and his dangerous gang. They're undesirable acquaintances, the whole lot of them, I can tell you. It's a pity, Meester Laird, a very great pity," he declared.

"I think it also a pity, Miller—a shame, indeed—to prejudge a woman who, after all, may be innocent!" I remarked in a voice of reproach.

"Innocent or guilty, you've placed yourself in a very unenviable position," he remarked. "You've wilfully harboured and assisted a person wanted upon a capital charge."

"Because I do not believe in her guilt," I declared, boldly.

"No, Meester Laird. Come, speak the truth," he said very seriously; "because you love this girl—eh?—and love is always blind."

I smiled, but made no reply. Though I tried not to show it, I resented this police officer occupying himself with what were my purely private affairs.

"And beyond that," Miller went on, "I've also discovered, to my great annoyance, that we have to thank you for giving warning to that thief, Rushton, and to old Jacobsen in Utrecht, with the result that they both have escaped."

"What I have done is my own affair!" I cried. "Until to-day, Miller, we've always been friends. To-day I take it that you have become my enemy?"

"In so far as Jim Almond's daughter is concerned."

My only object in this discussion was to gain time for Iris to get clear away. She knew that Miller was with me, and without a doubt would exercise all care in making good her escape from the place. This was not the first time by many that she had left her employment suddenly, and shown no trace of the direction of her flight.

"You did not discover her whereabouts yourself!" I exclaimed. "Someone gave her away. Tell me the truth."

"Yes," he laughed. "It is the truth. We

had a letter at the 'Yard' this morning—an anonymous letter."

"From where?"

"Posted in Brighton," he replied, rather reluctantly.

"And the writer was Philip Pontifex?"

"Probably. It was, however, in a disguised hand."

I bit my lip. The blackguard who had given me his word of honour not to harm Iris, had played her a scurvy trick, and had told the police of her hiding-place!

"You seem to know something of it," he went on. "Why should he have given her so completely away? With what object?"

"That remains to be seen," was my quick response.

"You know Pontifex?"

"I know him as a blackguard—one of Jim Almond's gang—a dangerous man, capable of doing anything, and a bitter enemy of poor Iris."

"For what reason have they quarrelled?"

"How can I tell?"

"Well, it was a pretty cute thing for the girl to come here as governess. I wonder how she got the engagement. I'll ask these people—the Northes—when they return."

"No," I urged. "Don't do anything of the kind. I can tell you everything. These people are friends of mine, and——"

"And you don't wish them to know that you are friendly with their governess, who is wanted by us! Quite natural."

I had no defence. Pontifex, as Iris feared, had revealed where she had hidden herself. Truly that morning had been an eventful one.

"My dear Miller," I cried, with rising anger, "it is immaterial to me what my host and hostess know. You may allege whatever you like!"

"No, Meester Laird," exclaimed the police officer, his hands thrust into the pockets of his jacket. "You forget that you yourself are in a very unenviable position, as aider and abettor of this gang. Your duty was to tell me the truth from the very first."

"I should have done, had you not condemned her upon mere suspicion."

"My grounds for the condemnation are more than mere suspicion," he replied, hastily. "When you know the truth it will surprise you."

"Probably," I said; "but I am in possession of knowledge which will amaze you, I think, when the time is ripe for me to reveal it."

"It's your duty, Meester Laird, to assist the police," he said, gravely.

"It may be my duty, but I refuse to lift a hand against a friend."

"You have already rendered yourself liable to prosecution and imprisonment."

"I'm well aware of that," I laughed. "But when the truth of the affair at Gerrard's Cross is known my actions will not appear so treacherous as they appear to-day. Now you have found Iris Almond—for I admit that she is governess in this household—then perhaps you will find and arrest the writer of your anonymous letter."

"I may—who knows?"

"Look here, Miller," I cried, after a pause. "This isn't like you, hounding down an unfortunate girl who is the victim of a gang of blackguards. You are always so chivalrous, always so very tender-hearted when dealing with a woman," I added, reproachfully. "What's the meaning of this?"

"I'm angry with you!" he declared. "You've fooled me."

"For two reasons—first, because she is my friend; and secondly, because she is innocent."

"Innocent!" he echoed. "She'll have a good deal of difficulty in proving an *alibi*, I fear."

"That's just it!" I cried, despairingly. "She can't prove her innocence. Those men hold her beneath their thumbs."

"That's her story," he laughed. "I've heard that from an accused woman more than once."

"But have you no pity, man?" I cried. "Do you actually intend to arrest Iris Almond?"

"Most certainly. This is no matter for sen-

timent, my dear sir," he replied. "I have my duty to execute. I regret," he added, "that I must appear harsh and inexorable before a man who is my friend. But are you not foolish? Think! You have allowed yourself to become fascinated by this woman after all I told you."

"But she is not guilty of the crime!" I declared. "I'm sure she's not."

"It isn't likely that she would confess to you, above all men," was the detective's sarcastic response.

"I don't think it just to prejudge her, as you have done," I insisted, emphatically, and annoyed.

"If there was the slightest shadow of doubt, I should allow it to her, Meester Laird," announced the Pole who spoke such fluent English; "but, unfortunately, there is not. In addition to the somewhat unreliable evidence of that poacher, Smith, another witness has come forward—an eye-witness—one who also saw Iris Almond kill this poor young fellow."

"It's a lie!" I gasped.

"Do not make that assertion until you know who it is who saw the pair, and you have heard the true story," my friend urged.

"I won't believe it!" I cried. "It's some infernal plot of those blackguards who wish, for their own sinister purpose, to either send poor

Iris to the scaffold or to penal servitude for life ! ”

“ No, Meester Laird. In that you are quite mistaken,” he declared. “ It is no plot of the gang whatsoever.”

“ But have you not told me that Pontifex is the author of the anonymous letter your department has received ? ”

“ I only agreed with you that he might possibly be the writer. He’s rather handy with his pen, you know. Personally, however, I believe the writer to be a person quite unconnected with the Almond crowd. Remember, it is in a disguised hand.”

“ Why do you doubt that Pontifex is the sender ? ” I asked quickly.

“ Because—well, as far as I can see it would be against his own interests, and those of Rrsh-ton and Almond, to reveal the girl’s whereabouts. When arrested she certainly will make a statement as to where they are all in hiding.”

“ She would not implicate her own father.”

“ But those she denounces will do so in retaliation, and thus the whole gang will be broken up. Now Pontifex is far too clever to risk that, hence my theory is that the person who revealed the identity of Miss Bond is not our friend the penman.”

For a considerable time I kept Inspector Miller in conversation, though he glanced at his watch,

and seeing that it was past the luncheon hour, remarked that the governess would no doubt very soon return.

As for myself I was all eagerness to know whether Iris had remained or whether she had fled, and was once more beyond the reach of the ubiquitous officer who stood before me.

Northey might return to luncheon at any moment, but I knew that Mrs. Northey was, after her shopping in the village, driving over to lunch with some friends named Hooker at Stockbridge. My sole desire, therefore, was to prevent Miller from speaking again with the old butler Blacker, for he would, no doubt, inquire for Miss Bond, and this old servant, in his ignorance, would speak the truth.

Those were breathlessly exciting moments, for the liberty of Iris was now at stake.

I had all along persuaded myself that she was innocent, yet what Miller had told me, of another actual eye-witness who had come forward, now caused me to ponder, and to wonder whether, after all, the officer's outspoken words concerning myself were not justified.

Exerting all the tact of which I was capable—not much, perhaps—I contrived to engage Miller in conversation for yet another half-hour, until he could bear the prolonged absence of the governess no longer.

"I shall ring the bell, and ask the butler to

call the girl," he said. "It will be better for us to meet here, alone, rather than face the family. It's nearly two o'clock, therefore it's certain she's now returned."

"You didn't ask the butler about the governess when you arrived?"

"Hardly; I knew from the lodge-keeper's wife that the girl was out, so I inquired for you. I don't want her to slip through my fingers again, as you may well imagine. If I had asked the butler he might, perhaps, have spoken to her, and she'd grow alarmed and decamp. That's happened to me more than once."

He had touched the bell while he had been speaking, and Blacker opened the door.

"Is the governess, Miss Bond, back yet?" Miller asked of the old servant.

"No, sir," replied the man. "She went out directly after your arrival, sir, and has not returned."

"After my arrival," Miller echoed, in dismay, while my heart gave a great bound of joy.

"Yes, sir. I saw her leaving the house by the back road, mounted on Miss Evans' cycle."

"Who's Miss Evans?"

"The young woman who comes from Winchester to teach Miss Marion music, sir. She left her cycle here the last time she came."

"Miller," I said quietly. "She's gone out, over to Stockbridge perhaps, where Marion and

her mother are lunching. She'll be back at tea-time."

"No," he cried, with an imprecation beneath his breath, after Blacker had turned to go out. "She'll never come back! She's got away from beneath my very nose, and by the neatest means possible—on a cycle, and with a start of nearly an hour and a half! But, by heaven, Macster Laird, though I half suspect that you knew of her flight all along, I repeat my vow! I'll find her yet."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CIPHER AND ITS KEY

I WAS back again in London.

At Charlwood the strange departure of the exemplary Miss Bond was regarded as a complete and profound mystery.

On Mrs. Northey's return at five o'clock in the afternoon Blacker told her how the governess had suddenly mounted Miss Evans' bicycle and ridden away, while my hostess in turn communicated the strange story to my host.

"The fact is, Laird," declared Fred Northey, as we sat together over the port that evening, "Miss Bond was a devilish good-looking girl, and I always had my suspicion that there was something curious about her. She had the air of a girl used to smart society, and yet she was quite simple-minded and humble, a most excellent companion for little Marion."

I smiled within myself. Little did the dear old fellow dream of the truth, for Miller had departed in chagrin, without explaining his business to anybody save myself.

"Her disappearance is quite unaccountable,"

I said. "I saw her here, in the house, and was talking to her about twelve. Then a man called to see me, and I didn't see her again."

"Well, do you think we ought to inform the county police at Winchester?"

I reflected for a second, and, fearing that Miller might have already invoked the aid of the rural constables in making inquiries for the missing lady cyclist, said:

"Well, really, I hardly think it worth going to the police about, at least not just yet. She may have had a secret lover somewhere, and eloped with him. I don't think there's any question of foul play, or anything to cause the police to exert themselves. We know that she went away of her own accord."

"I know," he said, contemplating his cigarette. "But the mystery of it all puzzles me. I'd like to get at the bottom of it."

"So would I," was my reply. "No doubt we shall. You'll get an apologetic letter to-morrow."

I proved a prophet, for on the day after the morrow came a brief letter bearing the postmark of Woolwich, addressed to Mrs. Northey, in which the governess expressed her great regret at having been called so suddenly from her very comfortable home, and from little Marion; enclosing the cloak-room ticket of the cycle which was at the cloak-room of the loop line at

Waterloo, and expressing a hope that she would one day have an opportunity of again meeting her very kind friends.

"Well, I'm hanged!" cried Fred Northey, when his wife handed it to him across the breakfast-table. "That's about the coolest letter a girl could write to her mistress! She doesn't say what called her away so suddenly."

"Love, my dear fellow!" I laughed. "It's the only thing that calls away a girl suddenly like that. It was love, depend upon it."

"Do you know, Mr. Laird," exclaimed my hostess, "I've been thinking, and it seems to me very much as though Miss Bond was afraid of that man who called to see you. Blacker says you showed her his card."

I held my breath.

"Ah! So I did," was my lame reply. "I showed it to her because it was rather a curiosity—a new thing in cards. My friend Miller—a professional man—is a bit eccentric. But she did not know him. Now could she possibly be in fear of him?"

"Then she didn't see him?"

"Certainly not. They did not meet," I said. "From what Blacker says, she must have gone out and got Miss Evans' cycle very soon after I entered the drawing-room to meet my friend."

"Well," said Fred Northey, as he broke an

egg, "the mystery is cleared up, and we must get another governess; an infernal nuisance, but one we can't avoid, I suppose."

And then the subject dropped, and Miss Bond was quickly forgotten.

By that same post I received a rather angry letter from Miller, upbraiding me for allowing Iris to escape as I had done. To this I replied briefly that she was my friend, and that I had treated her as such.

Then, for about ten days, I remained in Hampshire with the Northcys, hoping that as Iris had written to my hostess she would also write to me. But my hopes were, alas, in vain. No letter came. She either feared to write, or else she deemed it wisest that I should remain without knowledge of her whereabouts.

So I returned again to Savoy Court, full of gravest misgivings.

I saw nothing of Miller, and as day followed day in silence I knew that Iris had successfully evaded him. But where was she? Why did she not write?

Gloomy and despairing, I strolled in Pall Mall, St. James's Street, and Piccadilly, heedless of the brilliant weather, or of the well-dressed crowds who passed me by. The London season had commenced, the usual flock of American tourists were overflowing the big hotels, and the droves of foreign tourists were being driven

about in brakes to see the sights of our dear old dirty metropolis.

The Park was bright with flowers and all the beauty of its fresh greenery; window-boxes everywhere blossomed with marguerites or geraniums, and the West End had awakened now that "the season," as decreed by that little section of the world called Society, had commenced.

The Academy had opened, and following it there came to me, as there always did, a shoal of invitations to dinners, luncheons, receptions, and dances, far too many, indeed, as every man who is an idler in town knows. I accepted few of them, for that grave charge against Iris Almond ever obsessed me. Until Miller had called at Charlwood I had believed in her innocence, but, somehow, his allegations had aroused within me serious suspicion. There was yet another eye-witness—a person who saw her kill her lover!

At one moment I refused to give credence to that terrible accusation, but at the next I realised to the full that Miller was not a man given to wild and unfounded statements, and that he must have some serious ground for his allegation.

I do not know what Seddon thought, but I saw that he was very anxious about me. He declared that I was unwell, and that I ought to consult my friend, Doctor Lewis.

One warm afternoon, after I had returned from the club, where I had lunched with my friend,

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Dick Duncan, the motor-boat enthusiast, I chanced to be looking through some papers in my despatch-box when I came across that puzzling message which Iris had written in the Scotch express on the first occasion we had met :

8. 0. 3. 12. 3.

EUGENE.

9. 24. 18. 15. 2. 9. 16.

6. 1. 2. 3. 22. 22. 12. 18.

RUE BLANCHE, 196A. 3ME.

THE BLACK THREE.

A hundred times had I endeavoured to read it, but in vain. Indeed at New Scotland Yard they had tried and failed. How could I therefore hope for success ?

Yet, with that tantalising message before me, I sat trying again and again to decipher its meaning. No doubt it was a secret message sent by Iris to her lover, for was not that crumpled half-sheet of notepaper found in the dead man's breast pocket—that same piece of paper whereon I had seen her, with her own hand, trace that array of figures ?

"The Black Three!" Did that refer to Jim Almond and his two audacious confederates, Pontifex and Rushton ? I had suspicions that it did.

I recollected that in passing through Paris I

had omitted to ascertain who lived at Rue Blanche, 196a, 3me. Yet this was not very difficult to ascertain, for I immediately descended by the lift into the reception bureau of the hotel, and there found from "Bottin," the directory of Paris, that the apartment in question was occupied by Jules Bérand. But there was, of course, a question whether the Rue Blanche referred to in the message was in Paris or in some other French town.

Again I returned to my rooms above, and sat puzzling my brain to read that curious array of figures—the cipher used by a gang of thieves.

Who was Eugene? Ah, if I could only read the line above and those below I should know. The truth would no doubt be revealed.

I had believed from the first—just as the experts at Scotland Yard had no doubt believed—that the key to the cipher was some prearranged one, hence it presented the greatest difficulty to any who attempted to learn what was there written. Someone has said that nobody has ever been able to invent a numerical cipher that will defy all attempts to unravel its meaning—except, of course, a prearranged code. Some of the ciphers used in diplomatic correspondence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were marvels of ingenuity, yet in these latter days the secret documents lying in our archives have been read quite easily by experts.

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I had seated myself at my writing-table, with pen and paper before me, as I had done so many times previously, and I had covered sheet after sheet with numbers, letters and calculations, when of a sudden I made an amazing discovery.

Was it possible that its very simplicity had been the means of misleading all those who had tried to decipher it?

I bent quickly to my work, making more rapid calculations.

Yes, I had discovered the key! That secret message of Iris which had so baffled both police and public lay open before me.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PLANT OF THE THIRD FLOOR

THE thing was quite simple, after all. The words, "The Black Three," which ended the message, corresponded with the last numeral of the first line, which was, strangely enough, a "black" figure three—no doubt three men. That was the key—three to be added to each number, and then applied to the letters of the alphabet!

Thus the first line I read—8, 0, 3, 12, 3, became 11, 3, 6, 15, which, applied to the alphabet, read K.C.F.O.

Now K.C. I read as King's Cross, while instead of F.O. I read 6-15, the time of our arrival at the London terminus!

The next line, 9, 24, 18, 15, 2, 9, 16, became 12, 1, 21, 18, 5, 12, 19, or "Laurels," which I recognised as the name of the house where Iris and her father had been in hiding near Hounslow.

Then came the third line of figures, 6, 1, 2, 3, 22, 22, 12, 18, which with three added to each became 9, 4, 5, 6, 25, 25, 15, 21, and applied to

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the alphabet became a bold challenge: "I defy you!"

The message was plain enough. It gave the person to whom it was addressed the hour of her arrival in London, and conveyed that she intended to return to "The Laurels," at the same time declaring herself in no fear of any reprisal. Yet who was Eugene?

Was the message addressed to her lover, Paul Pauletti, upon whom it was afterwards found, or was it intended for the mysterious man who was apparently a Frenchman, no doubt, and perhaps one of her father's cosmopolitan confederates? For I had heard from Miller that the gang numbered nearly a dozen men of various nationalities.

The address in the Rue Blanche might be their head-quarters in Paris! It occurred to me to cross the Channel that night, and investigate. Yet Miller had in all probability been there long ago. Still, to satisfy my own curiosity, I left Charing Cross by the night mail, and about nine o'clock on the following morning, in an auto-cab, I ascended the steep hill which runs from the Trinité up to the Boulevard de Clichy.

Passing the Casino de Paris, the street of high grey-painted houses narrowed as it reached the exterior boulevard, and the cab drew up before a house on the right-hand side of the way, a few doors from the Rue Chaptal. The entrance

was dark and uncleanly, a house which differed but little from any in that rather *bizarre* quarter. I ascended the oak steps, worn thin by the tramp of many feet, until I arrived at the third floor, where I pulled a bell-cord to inquire for Mademoiselle Almond.

There was, however, no response. Three times I rang, and as I got no answer I bent and looked through the keyhole. Then I saw that the apartment was devoid of furniture. The occupant, Monsieur Jules Bérand, as he was given in "Bottin," had moved.

Descending, I found the *concierge*, a stout, slovenly woman in a blue apron, who, after I had slipped a five-franc piece into her hand, became communicative.

"I suppose m'sieur is a police agent—eh?" she asked in French, eyeing me critically.

"Why?" I inquired in the same language.

"Well, because the police have kept watch upon the apartment *au troisième* for months past. They seem to expect that M'sieur Bérand will return. But myself I don't think he ever will."

"Why not?"

"Because I understand they have a very serious charge against him, the nature of which, however, I cannot learn," replied the woman.

"But what was this M'sieur Bérand—what was he like?"

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"He was of medium height, and rather dark, but he was not a Frenchman, that's my belief. He spoke with a foreign accent, yet he was always most generous to me. He's lived here these three years past, and often had friends to visit him. I used to keep his place tidy for him."

"The apartment is now empty," I remarked.

"No. There is nothing in the hall," she said.

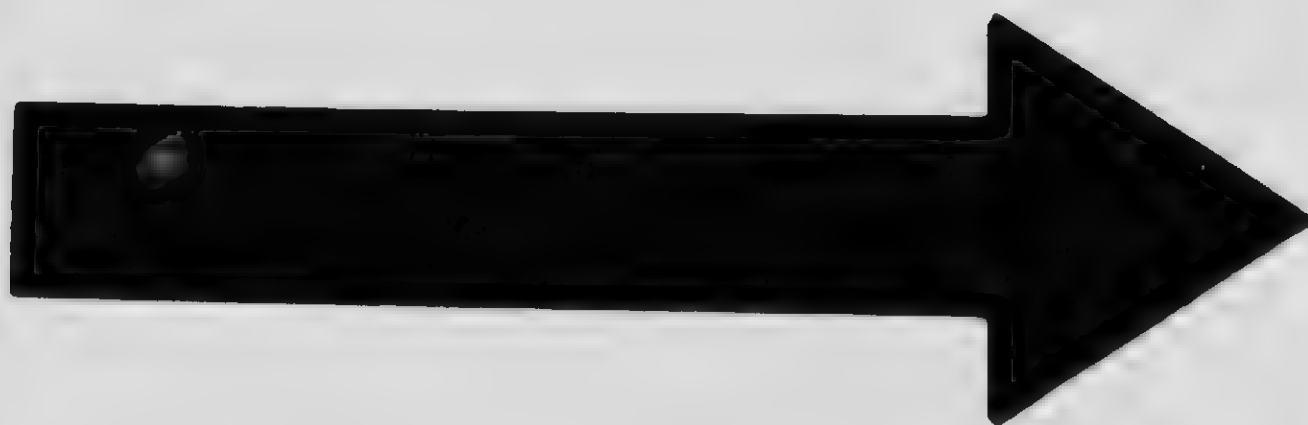
"But he took out all the things and piled them inside the rooms before he fled. I suppose he wished to give people the impression that he had moved."

"You saw his friends sometimes, I suppose?"

"On several occasions. They were generally Englishmen, or Italians—scarcely ever Frenchmen. But he was in the feather trade, and was agent for a London firm, I believe. He had offices somewhere off the Rue des Petits-Champs, so he told me."

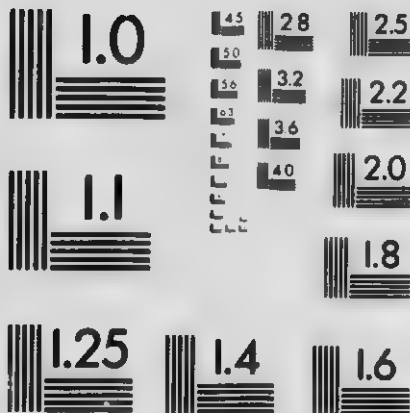
I tried to obtain from her a more accurate description of the absent tenant of the third floor, but it was so vague and contradictory that I could not identify him with either Pontifex or Rushton. Was he, I wondered, the mysterious Eugene, or Jim Almond himself?

The fact that the Paris police were keeping the place under observation showed me that Miller had been immediately active, and that the absent tenant was suspected of being impli-



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cated in the operations of "Slim Jim" and his friends.

The old woman, after the administration of a further piece of five francs, admitted that she held the key of Monsieur Bérard's apartment. Would I care to inspect it?

She still believed me to be a police-agent, and, of course, I did not undeceive her.

So I reascended after her, and, puffing considerably, she let me into a close, stuffy, shabbily furnished little flat of four rooms and kitchen. It was dirty and neglected, after the tenant's long absence. Dust lay thickly everywhere, and the morning sunlight was partly obscured by the winter's grime upon the windows.

It was a dull depressing place, and certainly contained no luxury.

"M'sieur Caillard, of the Prefecture of Police—perhaps you know him—searched the place months ago, back in January, and took away some papers he found in that drawer," indicating the drawer in a table in one of the bedrooms.

"Did he tell you anything?"

"No, m'sieur. The police do not speak much though we as *concierges* help them considerably. They owe much of their information to us, I can assure you. As you know, we are compelled to furnish reports of our tenants, and record any suspicions we may have."

"Then the tenant can pay well and so have

a favourable report, I suppose ? ” I remarked, smiling.

Whereat the fat old woman grinned from ear to ear.

“ The police, no doubt, believe that the gentleman will return,” I said. “ Have they been here lately ? ”

“ They come now and then—perhaps once a week,” was her answer. “ I have orders to telephone to the Prefecture directly he arrives. But,” she added with a laugh, “ I think he’s far too shrewd to be caught.”

“ Oh, then he has his wits about him—eh ? ”

“ I should rather say so. He is as sharp-witted and sharp-eyed as the police themselves,” was her answer.

Who could the absent tenant possibly be, I wondered.

We were descending the stairs when, of a sudden, the old woman exclaimed in French :

“ There ! I quite forgot until this very moment ! Dear me, my memory must be failing me. Fancy, not to have thought of it.”

“ Of what ? ” I asked.

“ Of his photograph. I have one somewhere.”

“ You have,” I cried, anxiously. “ I’ll give you a louis if you will find it and show it to me. How came you by it ? ”

“ I was cleaning out his rooms one day when I found in the grate, where he had evidently

thrown it to burn it, a small snapshot which someone had taken of him. I picked it out, and have kept it," she said. "Step into my room while I go and see if I can find it."

And while I waited in her dark little den, in which she seemed to employ her time in ironing, she returned into the adjoining chamber to search.

Fully a quarter of an hour was she absent, but at last, with a triumphant smile, still puffing and blowing with exertion, she returned and handed me a small half-faded and badly-taken amateur snapshot of a rather thin-faced, narrow-eyed, clean-shaven man, of pronounced aquiline features, dressed in a straw hat and striped lounge suit. Behind him was a garden-chair and striped tent, while close to him lay an English fox-terrier. The picture had evidently been taken upon somebody's lawn, but where, it was impossible to tell.

I looked long and steadily at the man's face, but I was convinced that I had never before seen it.

He was an entire stranger to me.

Therefore, I paid the louis I had promised, and re-entering the auto-cab, drove down to the "Grand" for my breakfast. Then, at midday, I left the Gare du Nord again on my return to London.

Paris possessed no attraction for me, and to

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London I went back, hoping to hear from the woman upon whom that terrible stigma had fallen.

Was not her silence proof in itself of her guilt? This thought had occurred to me more than once. And the more I reflected the more uncertain I became.

The weeks slipped by. The London season, prolonged as it is nowadays, had passed, and the busy Strand had become hot, dusty and unbearable. The stuffy streets smelt of tar, and the reeking motor-buses, with their jar and noise, added to the nerve-racking turmoil that is unceasing. The club had closed for its annual cleaning, the houses in Mayfair and Belgravia were deserted, with drawn blinds, and everyone who could escape to the seaside or the country had done so.

Yet I remained, one of the very few remaining tenants in Savoy Court.

The Northeys had invited me down again, but I had excused myself, while I had also half a dozen other pressing invitations to country-houses in England and in Scotland. Yet, somehow, I preferred to remain at home, because I felt that one day, ere long, the unexpected must happen.

One afternoon, Whatton, the bank clerk from Winchester, had called upon me, and we had had a long chat.

He knew, of course, of Iris's sudden departure from Charlwood, but was in ignorance of its cause. He believed that she had left, and had gone into hiding on account of the threats he had uttered. Therefore, I did not undeceive him.

"I suppose," I said, as we sat talking, "I suppose that during your acquaintance with Pontifex and the others, you knew no one with the Christian name of Eugene?"

"Eugene!" he repeated. "Why, that surely was the name mentioned on that cryptic message found upon poor Paul?"

"Yes," I said.

He was silent. From his manner I saw that he was hesitating whether or not he should tell me something in confidence.

"I expect the police thoroughly investigated that cipher message—at least, as far as they could. It has never yet been wholly deciphered, I believe," he mentioned at last.

"They have not deciphered it," I replied, "but I have. In this matter, Mr. Whatton, we are working together, please recollect. Therefore, I will show you how the message really reads." And taking it from my writing-table, I explained it to him.

For some time he did not speak. Then he said:

"I wonder why she sent Paul such a message?"

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Why did she boldly utter that challenge of defiance? What threat had he made? Yet—yet does it not condemn her? She defied him, and then, being in fear of him, she closed his lips effectually—by death."

"Ah!" I cried, "you still believe her guilty, Mr. Whatton?"

"I do. I shall always believe that she killed my friend until she has been proved to be innocent."

"That is what I hope one day, ere long, to be in a position to do."

"The police, you say, are not aware that you have been successful in deciphering this message," he said. "I think they should certainly know."

"I differ. Let them discover what they can. They surely require no help from us."

"A moment ago you said that you and I were acting conjointly in trying to solve this mystery, Mr. Laird," he exclaimed. "Please tell me one thing—the real reason 'Miss Bond,' as she called herself, left Charlwood so suddenly. There were some curious rumours about the country, remember—rumours which connected you with her sudden flight. The villagers had seen you two together and had naturally gossiped."

"It was not at my suggestion, or with my knowledge that the lady left her employment," was my quick response. "I had nothing what-

ever to do with it. She was evidently in deadly fear of you and disappeared. I have neither seen nor heard of her since that afternoon."

"Yes," he laughed in triumph. "My sudden reappearance upset her. She fears me, Mr. Laird; and assuredly she has good reason to fear my accusation."

"That remains to be seen, Mr. Whatton," I said, coldly. "Do not let us prejudge her until we have solved the problem that is still before us—the problem of who killed Paul Pauletti, and by what secret means he was assassinated."

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CHAPTER XXVIII

JIM ALMOND AT HOME

I ALIGHTED from the train at a small road-side station between Newbury and Devizes, in what is known as the Vale of Pewsey, and a moment later had lifted my hat and taken the white-gloved hand of a neat little figure in a white cotton gown, a straw hat and cream silk motor-veil—Iris herself.

That hot summer's morning I had received from her a letter asking me to go into the country to see her, and telling me that she would meet me by the train which arrived at Chirton Station at 3.33. She gave me no address, therefore I could not reply. I merely kept the appointment, and at last we again stood together.

I was the only alighting passenger, and as we emerged from the station after a brief greeting I found a small brown governess-cart and grey pony being held by a boy.

"Come, Mr. Laird," she said, laughing, "you get in first."

I did so without remark, yet wondering where

I was to be taken, and she followed me, when a moment later the smart little pony was trotting away along the white dusty road, and we were alone.

The station seemed some distance from the village, and instead of going in that direction we had turned to the left and were setting our faces to the open country northward.

As she drove I reproached her with neglecting for so long to inform me of her whereabouts, whereupon she assured me that as soon as she had been at liberty she had sent me word. Then, noting the smart little turn-out, I said with a smile :

" I suppose you are a governess again, eh ? Is it not a little risky for you to drive me—a stranger ? "

" I have run many risks before," she said, with a sweet smile. " Surely I risked a great deal before I managed to get away from Charlewood."

" Yes," I said, " where did you go ? "

" To London first," she replied. " Afterwards I went to Windermere, and then to Glasgow, Dundee, and by steamer to London. A week later I was in Gothenburg, and now I am here—at last."

" Ah ! " I sighed, amazed, " what a traveller you are ! I thought myself a cosmopolitan until I met you ! "

"A cosmopolitan of necessity," she said, rather sadly.

Her conversation was mostly of the narrow escape she had had at Charlwood, while almost in the same breath she made inquiry as to why Miller had called upon me, and what he had told me.

Then, as we drove together along those leafy country lanes, I recounted to her our conversation, much as I have already recounted it in these pages.

She heard me in silence, until at last she said :

"It must have been that man, Whatton, who wrote the anonymous letter to Scotland Yard !"

"No. I think not," was my reply. "My own idea is that it was one of your father's friends."

"Would not Inspector Miller allow you to see it ?"

"It was in London," I reflected. "He told me it was in a disguised handwriting. But in any case your escape was a narrow one."

"I know," she said hastily, handing me the reins while she tightened her veil. "I had to exercise the greatest caution. I cycled all day long till dark, before I dared to alight at a railway station, and later that night I found myself at Paddington."

Thus we had driven for nearly three miles, I judged, passing through a long, straggling, old-world village, with a squat-steeped church, ivy-

grown and picturesque, and then out again upon a broad, white highway beside which ran many lines of telegraphs.

Presently we turned to the left into a narrow lane, where the greenery met overhead, and where the sun's hot rays did not penetrate. The hill was steep, but Tommy, the pony, climbed it, and having passed a couple of labourers' cottages, we came suddenly upon a long old-fashioned thatched cottage, with great oak beams showing in its whitewashed walls, and small windows peeping forth from beneath the thatch. Before the place was a neat, well-kept flower garden; behind was another flower garden, an orchard, and a big meadow fringed by high, shady trees.

She turned the pony suddenly into the rustic gateway, and round to the back of the picturesque cottage, where she sprang out.

As she did so, a tall, rather thin, elderly, grey-moustached man, in a grey tweed suit and straw hat, emerged from the door. Whereupon she exclaimed:

"Mr. Laird—I want to introduce my father to you. Dad!" she cried. "Here's Mr. Laird—at last!"

The tall, military-looking man advanced towards me, and, greeting me, said:

"I am much honoured, sir, by making your acquaintance, and I wish at once to thank you

for the very many kindnesses you have shown to my dear daughter."

I was taken entirely aback by this sudden and unexpected meeting. I had no idea when I left London that I was going to meet the notorious Jim Almond, the man whose very name was synonymous with clever trickery and impudent fraud.

"This is our little home," explained Iris, enthusiastically. "We used to manage to live here at Wilsford quite a lot a few years ago, but of late we have not been able to be here, as you know," and I followed her through a small hall into a big, old-fashioned dining-room with oaken floor and great oak beams across the low-pitched ceiling. It was a charming old-world interior, the wide, high fireplace decorated with blue china, and the old-fashioned oak furniture thoroughly in keeping with the place, while upon the great sideboard were several fine pieces of antique silver.

The cushions were in covers of muslin, and at the casement windows were artistic blinds and hangings, all of which told of taste displayed by the daughter of the house.

"What a really delightful old place!" I cried involuntarily.

"Yes," said the tall man. "It was three old cottages when I bought it ten years ago, but I had them knocked into one, and it's made quite

a comfortable little snugger—very remote and rural, of course. But sometimes that's an advantage," he added, with a grin.

I sank into the easy chair he indicated, and he took one opposite me, while Iris went forth to give orders to the stable-lad who had taken over the pony.

Jim Almond was entirely unlike the mental picture I had formed of him. I believed him to be a fat, prosperous-looking man, of the same type as Pontifex; yet here was a tall, thin, active man, a typical old Colonial, with a bronzed, wrinkled face: and yet possessed of an air of refinement which gave him the manner of a gentleman.

This man, who had handed me the cigars with such polish and courtesy, was, even according to Miller, a man who was a hero. He had fought in some of our fiercest wars, and had won for himself many honours, yet he had fallen in his declining years, and had become one of the most expert of international thieves.

"It is a great pleasure to be here at home to receive you, Mr. Laird," he declared, as I sat back, regarding him with fixed curiosity. The man before me was actually "Slim Jim," the head of the gang who had to their credit a dozen of the most daring thefts ever perpetrated on the Continent.

"And it affords me equal pleasure, Mr. Almond, to be with you," I assured him.

"I feared, perhaps, that—well—that you would not, in the circumstances, care to know me," he said, with hesitation. "My record is not—well, not exactly the sort that one cares for one's personal friends to possess."

"I know," I said, hastily. "But we need not refer to that, need we? Your daughter Iris and myself are very good friends, and I at once came to meet her when she invited me."

"My dear sir," exclaimed the thief, speaking in a deep, earnest voice as he bent towards me, "both Iris and I owe you a very deep debt of gratitude. Were it not for you she would have been arrested long ago, and in all probability my identity would have been disclosed, and I, too, would have been arrested in consequence. You know who and what I am, and yet you have ever been active on my dear daughter's behalf."

"Because we are friends," I said, rather confused. "There is no need in the least to thank me, Mr. Almond. I am only too pleased that you have not been discovered, and that you are still able to live in this cosy little place while the police of Europe are actively searching for you."

"I know they are," he laughed, twisting his cigar in his fingers. "They are searching for Ralph Rushton, too. You did him a good turn by giving him the 'tip' to clear out. By Jove!

you were only just in time. Miller's getting rather 'hot stuff' just now!" he laughed.

"Somebody in your camp has, I fear, Mr. Almond, given information against you. It is certain that the police received an anonymous letter which told of Iris's whereabouts."

"That mad-headed young fool, Whatton," he said. "He, no doubt, wrote a letter to Scotland Yard, after he recognised Iris in Winchester."

"Then you don't suspect any of your friends of playing a double game?" I said.

"No, Mr. Laird. Though their character may leave something to be desired, they are not the kind of men to betray myself—their leader."

"You have every confidence in them," I remarked, "and yet Iris has not."

"Iris is a woman—and women sometimes entertain strange prejudices," was his reply, as he watched the tobacco smoke curl towards the low-pitched ceiling. On the table was a great bowl of yellow roses, and the sweetness of their odour filled the sombre old room. Surely that peaceful rural cottage home was the last where the police would seek for the notorious Jim Almond, the cosmopolitan who frequented the best hotels on the Continent, and who, from the rough and tumble of a camp life, had developed into a *gourmet*.

"Well," I said, after a brief pause, "I've often heard it said that a woman is much quicker

of perception than a man, and that she possesses unusual power of scenting evil, when evil is intended yet well concealed."

"Sometimes they err in being too suspicious," he said. "Iris does on some occasions. She then becomes nervous without necessity."

I was hoping that he would refer to the tragedy at Gerrard's Cross, or at least afford me opportunity to refer to it. But he did not. He seemed to purposely avoid any reference to that very unpalatable subject.

We chatted on for a long time, Iris apparently being purposely absent. He told me how he had been chased for months up and down the Continent and of the several very narrow escapes he had had. Then, by the manner in which he referred to Iris, I saw how entirely devoted he was to her.

"She is all I have, now that her poor mother is dead, Mr. Laird," he said. "No one regrets more than myself that she has been compelled to share the lot of an adventurer like myself. But I hope, with her, that the day may not be far distant when I shall find myself able to give it all up and live here in peace, happiness, and——"

"And security," I added.

"No," said the old man quickly, in a low hoarse voice. "Security I shall never have, alas! Jim Almond, or 'Slim Jim,' as some of

them call me, will still be 'wanted,' even though another twenty years may pass. No, my only desire is to lead an honest life in the future for the sake of my dear girl, and, at the same time, try to make reparation for what has gone past."

"Iris has already spoken to me of that," I said simply. "She wishes you to live a life of peace, which surely you can do here, amid these beautiful surroundings."

But he sighed as he shook his head in sorrow, saying :

"Who knows but this very hour may not be my last hour of liberty ! What hope could I have of any clemency from jury or judge ? No, Mr. Laird. I'm far too well known. One day I shall be arrested. That must come—I know it must. But for myself, I shall not fret. I only fear for Iris's sake—for the sake of my brave, dear, devoted girl, who, though she may be the associate of thieves, is nevertheless in my eyes as honest and pure as she is beautiful. Ah ! yes," he cried a second later. "I know you must sneer at me for these words. But I tell you it's the truth, Mr. Laird. She's——"

But he did not conclude his sentence, for at that moment the girl re-entered the room, saying :

"Wouldn't you like to walk round the garden, Mr. Laird ? Dad will come also. It's a shame to sit in here, when it is lovely out of doors."

So we rose, and all three of us went forth into the sunny old-world garden, bright with its tangle of sweet-smelling flowers. All was so fresh and so delightful after the noise and stuffiness of the busy Strand.

We had passed through the garden, and out into the meadow which sloped upward to the brow of the hill, when suddenly I halted, staring straight before me.

Father and daughter also halted in wonder at my pause.

But they had not seen what I had seen.

I halted between them with my eyes fixed before me, standing erect and motionless. I was rooted to the spot.

CHAPTER XXIX

CONTAINS THE HIDEOUS TRUTH

WHAT had met my gaze was certainly most unexpected.

Beneath the belt of firs at the edge of the sloping lawn, straight before me, was a red-and-white striped tent, with a small projecting canopy before the door. Within were a couple of deck chairs, and a small, green-covered bridge-table, while bounding towards us came Jim Almond's pet fox-terrier.

The scene was exactly that upon the snapshot shown to me by the fat *concierge* of the Rue Blanche. It was here that the mysterious Jules Bérand¹ had had his photograph taken! I recognised the tent, the chairs, the fox-terrier, and the trees in the background. And for that reason I stood dumfounded in wonder.

The old countrywoman who acted as servant presently brought us our tea to the tent, and surely mine was a quaint and unusual position, sitting there in a deck chair, chatting with the father and daughter for whom the police of Europe were searching.

Mr. James Jellicoe was the name by which he had been known for several years at Wilsford, as owner of that cosy little thatched cottage lying in the hollow, with its tall, old red-brick chimneys—the home for which Iris was ever longing, while so often compelled to live in the sun-glare of the south. Ah! I could well imagine how delightful was that purely English scene of peace and quiet, in comparison with the turmoil and unrest, the noise and the dust of Continental cities. I myself had suffered from nostalgia more than once—that dreaded homesickness which is only experienced by the traveller who is lonely and alone. Though half foreign by birth, the sweet-faced, fair-haired girl, who handed me my teacup with such grace and light laughter, was thoroughly English at heart. I pitied them both. I pitied the fine, handsome old soldier, who had fallen from the high honours he had won in the service of the British Colonies, and I pitied the poor frail girl who had become the tool of those unscrupulous blackguards, who, in fear of her, would now cast her into prison in degradation.

I had hated Jim Almond before I became acquainted with him, but now, I confess, as he chatted with me in confidence, telling me of his deep regrets, and his hope for his daughter's future, I saw that, though a daring and audacious keen-eyed adventurer, yet still within his heart

he was nevertheless a chivalrous gentleman. He would reform, and make amends. He was ready and anxious to do so, he declared, as we three sat together beneath the whispering pines—yet it was his “friends” who prevented him.

We had spoken of Inspector Miller, and of the strenuous efforts he had made, when I presently ventured to mention my visit to the Rue Blanche, and the photograph I had had in my hand of that very scene before us.

Father and daughter exchanged quick meaning glances.

Then, after a pause, the old man said :

“Bérard was a friend of ours. He has, however, disappeared. It is a mystery !”

“A—a business friend—eh ?” I asked, meaningly.

“Well, yes, if you choose to call him such. He worked usually with Pontifex. His last success was a year ago, with the National Bank of Sweden, at Stockholm. He was English, though he took a French name.”

“And you used to visit him in Paris, I believe ?”

“Yes—on rare occasions.”

Then, after a long silence, I put down my teacup, and turning to Iris, said :

“I remember, Miss Almond, that, while in the Scotch express with you, you wrote something upon a half-sheet of notepaper—a message in

cipher. You included in it the name of Eugene and the address in the Rue Blanche."

"Yes," she answered. "I did—unfortunately, for it was afterwards found upon poor Paul."

"Who was Eugene?"

"The name by which we called Bérard. His Christian name was Jules Eugene."

"And in that cryptic message you defied someone—whom?" I asked, with my eyes fixed upon hers.

"An enemy," was her vague answer. I saw that her face had grown deathly pale at mention of the tragedy, while the grey countenance of her father had also perceptibly altered. Therefore I quickly changed the subject, and both father and daughter became bright and cheerful again.

Presently we returned to the cottage, where I sat in the tiny drawing-room, with its green upholstery and latticed window, chatting with Iris alone. On a side-table was another big old blue punch-bowl filled with roses, and through the open casement came the sweet scent of the tangle of old-world flowers outside.

"Ah!" she sighed presently, lolling in her easy chair, her splendid eyes fixed upon the carpet, "it is very pleasant here, at home with dear dad. But how long will it last? The uncertainty of it all is terrible, for we know not from one moment to another lest we may be discovered. Bérard is missing. For all we

know he may be in prison somewhere, and he may avenge himself upon us by telling the police of this hiding-place, which he knows so well, and where, in days gone by, he has often been our guest."

"Why should he avenge himself?" I asked.

"There are reasons," was her reply, "rather strong reasons."

And that was all she would vouchsafe.

"Then your chief fear at this moment is of Bérard?" I said.

She nodded in the affirmative, while a moment later her father entered and disturbed our *tête-à-tête*.

By Jim Almond's manner I saw that he was greatly touched by the small service I had been able to render to Iris. He was, I found, a delightful companion, an excellent *raconteur*, and a thoroughgoing man of the world. Without doubt, the profits upon his various exploits against both banks and private persons had been very considerable; but now I knew him I could well understand that such men as Rushton and Pontifex might well secure the major portion of the gains for themselves. Their actions were directed by the master-mind of the man they called "Slim Jim," yet they took for themselves the bulk of their ill-gotten wealth.

As we sat again together in the little low-pitched but cosy room, I expressed interest in

the stories I had heard from the police concerning him, whereupon he went and fetched some of the ingenious paraphernalia of the professional gambler, and showed me how impossible it was for an unsuspecting man to win at cards, or at dice. With the latter, not only could he always throw five aces, but he nominated his throw beforehand, thus showing me the futility of gambling with the stranger.

As he manipulated dice and cards in a manner which showed that he had brought "sharping" to a fine art, I fell to wondering how many men had afterwards deeply regretted having played with him as their opponent.

He pressed me to stay to dinner, and then, when it grew too late for me to return to London, I was compelled to remain his guest for the night. The room I was given was a tiny one with sloping roof, and a small window under the thatch looking out upon the roadway, and the meadows beyond.

That night, as we sat smoking together over our curaçoa after dinner, Jim Almond took me fully into his confidence, expressing much regret at his many offences against the law.

"I've had a taste of prison before, Mr. Laird, and I can 'do a stretch' again," he said. "My only regret is for poor little Iris. I've wronged her shamefully by allowing her to associate with my confederates."

"Cannot you assist her to clear herself of this terrible accusation against her?" I asked, bending towards him, for his grey face was out of the zone of the lamplight.

"No," he said with a deep sigh. "I—I unfortunately can't. She alone knows the truth. I do not."

His manner and his voice both struck me as distinctly peculiar.

"But—but surely you, her father, do not believe that she is guilty of that crime," I cried, in dismay. "I know that she loved Paul Pauletti. Surely she did not kill him, as they allege."

For some time the keen-featured old man made no response. A long deep-drawn sigh filled the room. Then, at last, in a harsh strained voice, almost a whisper, he said:

"To me, she has never denied it."

I made no response. I sat with my eyes fixed upon that man before me—the man whose daring exploits had, from time to time, startled Europe—while through my bewildered brain flashed all that she had told me, her anxiety, her nervous apprehension, her terror.

No. Now that her own father believed her guilty, I saw that her actions were not those of a woman who was innocent of the terrible accusation.

I had, all along, been shielding a murderess!

I held my breath. My fingers clenched themselves in my palms.

And even as I sat there, I heard from the tiny drawing-room beyond, the sound of the piano and her sweet contralto voice singing one of those old love-songs of the far-off blue Apennines :

*"Se morta tu mi vuoi dammi veleno ;
Dammelo, Bello, di tua propria mano
La sepoltura mia sarà il tuo seno !"*

I loved this woman ! Yes, tragedy had indeed fallen upon my life and wrecked it, even now, more completely than it had been.

I loved this woman who had killed her lover.

She had enmeshed me so that I could not extricate myself. I longed to rise and to leave that house, but alas ! such action was, I found, impossible.

I had become hers. She possessed my very soul, and I had become fettered by bonds which, though invisible, were yet stronger than steel.

I listened to those words of hers in her soft musical Italian. Were they addressed to me ? Was that fierce declaration of love from her own heart—the love of a woman whose very touch had, to one man, proved fatal ?

I tried to close my ears, but I could not. I sat in that old-fashioned lamp-lit room, helpless, fascinated, staring—like a man in a dream, for now for the first time had the plain and hideous truth been revealed to me.

CHAPTER XXX

WHO KILLED PAUL ?

I WAS walking with Iris across the fields in the glorious sunset on the following evening.

Jim Almond had pressed me to remain the whole day, and I had done so, even against my inclination.

In cool cotton skirt and blouse, and straw mushroom-shaped hat trimmed with pale blue ribbon, Iris looked very sweet, as she strolled at my side across the wide sloping pastures from the wood in the direction of the house.

In an hour I should be leaving her—leaving her for ever.

We had been speaking of the past, and I saw that my words had impressed her. She had become silent and thoughtful, for she, too, knew that we were about to part, and I saw in her eyes the light of unshed tears.

"Iris," I said, halting in the path beside the high thorn hedge, "will you not be frank with me, and tell me what happened on that fatal day of our first meeting?"

She bit her lip, and I noticed that the colour left her cheeks.

"Yes," was her slow response. "There is no reason now why you should not be told all that I know. I have lost your esteem and regard, Mr. Laird. I know that, full well. How can you ever trust a woman like myself?"

"There is no question of trust involved," I declared. "We have been friends, and as such we surely should be frank and open with one another."

"Well, what can I tell you more than you already know?" she asked in despair. "Save, perhaps, that when you met me I was full of grave apprehension, for I felt that on that very day the truth must be exposed. I received a telegram at Newcastle Station, you will recollect. It was from Count Pauletti, and I feared that the summons was for a final interview. That man in the train, our mysterious fellow-passenger, was, I learned by a sign that he gave me, a friend of ours. He had recognised me in Edinburgh, and in the corridor of the train spoke to me in secret, and gave me certain information which, at the moment, I did not believe, that one of my father's friends had betrayed us."

"After receiving the telegram you wrote that curious message, half of which was in cipher—the message afterwards found in poor Pauletti's pocket," I said.

"I wrote it in order that he might copy it and use it against an enemy of his, who, on receipt of

it, would believe him to be in possession of the secrets of our association."

"Then you gave it to him?"

"Yes. On leaving you I drove through the fog to Paddington, and took train out to Gerard's Cross, where I met Paul close to the station and walked with him out into the country to what is known as the Duke's Wood. Upon our way we spoke of many things, and I gave him the cipher message, urging him to copy it and send it. Then his manner suddenly changed, and he accused my father of being at the head of the gang who had practised a great fraud upon him concerning the new invention for the control of Hertzian waves. I admitted it, and begged of him to forgive, declaring that I would induce my father and his friends to make restitution. But he grew angry, declaring that they had ruined him, and that he intended on the morrow to inform the police. I became plunged in grief, knowing that, with the knowledge of my father as an adventurer, he, honest and upright as he was, could have no further affection for me. I clung to him for a moment, but he cast me off roughly—and—and then I went forward—forward into the fog."

"Then that story told by the poacher Smith was correct?" I gasped, amazed.

She bent her head in the affirmative, standing bowed in silence before me.

"Well?" I asked quietly, after a brief pause.
"And that cryptic message? What was intended?"

"I hoped that by it Paul would show defiance, for I knew he had been threatened. The message made an appointment at 6.15 at King's Cross for the following day, to go to 'The Laurels,' our house near Hounslow, and see my father. Eugene was the name of the man to whom Paul was to send the message, and the address in Paris, and the mention of 'The Black Three,' would show the man Eugene that he was aware of the exploits of the gang."

"Who were 'The Black Three'?"

"Rushton, Pontifex, and Eugene himself. My father had named them so."

The western sky was slowly turning from gold to crimson, while, in the trees above, the birds were chattering before roosting, as again we walked slowly up the hill in silence, until suddenly we saw below the thatched roof of Jim Almond's cottage, from the tall red chimney of which the smoke curled upward in the still evening air.

As we looked, Almond himself came forth into the small flower garden, and shouted to us.

"Why!" cried Iris. "Look! There are strangers there! What can have happened?"

I looked in surprise, and saw standing at

Almond's side the tall burly figure of a man in a dark blue suit and wearing a bowler hat.

"Iris!" I cried. "Why—why that's Miller!"

She uttered a loud cry of despair, as she realised the truth. Miller, the man whose sudden appearance they had feared for months, nay years, had at last discovered them!

The end had come!

For a moment she halted. Her father watching, noted her hesitation, and beckoned her forward. Whereupon she walked towards the house, her face white and rigid, for she knew, alas, too well, that this man had come to convey both her and her father to the cells of a police-station.

"It is too cruel!" she cried, bursting into tears as she walked. "I know, now, that nothing can save me. Our enemies, those men who have owed everything in the past to dad, have triumphed. They have betrayed us."

As we entered the garden Miller greeted me cheerily, saying with his Polish accent:

"I've just come to make a rather unexpected call upon our friend here. I'm glad you are present, though I had no idea that you, Meester Laird, were a guest here!"

I glanced across at Almond, and saw that his face was ashen pale. He, too, knew that escape was now entirely out of the question.

Their downfall was complete.

We all four entered the dining-room, wherein

stood a rather well-dressed young lady, who was a perfect stranger to me.

The instant, however, that Iris recognised her she gave vent to a loud scream, and held back as though in horror and repugnance.

"Mees Maxwell," exclaimed Miller, "I think it will, perhaps, be best if you tell our friends at once the object of your visit here."

Maxwell! Then this must be the Elsie Maxwell, the actress friend of Pontifex, who was said to have supplanted Iris in the affections of the unfortunate young Count Pauletti—the woman of whom Whatton had alleged Iris to be so deadly jealous.

"Listen, Iris, for one moment," exclaimed her visitor. "First let me assure you that I am here bearing you no malice, even though I am accompanied by Mr. Miller, whom I have during the past two days been assisting in clearing up the mystery of Gerrard's Cross."

"You!" cried Iris, her eyes flashing with indignation. "You of all women! Poor Paul owed his death to you!"

"No," replied the girl Maxwell, in a perfectly calm voice, "that, my dear, is scarcely the truth."

"Tell us the whole truth, Elsie," urged "Slim Jim," who had already recovered his habitual easy-going air, even though he might be under arrest.

"I will tell you the truth," exclaimed the girl, for she seemed not more than twenty-one. "Listen, and I'll tell you the same plain facts that I've already told Inspector Miller. At his suggestion I have come down, Mr. Almond, to make explanation. On that foggy evening of the tragedy Phil Pontifex came to me and asked me to do him a favour, namely, to go down to Fulmer, not far from Gerrard's Cross, with a little packet to convey to Jules. Phil had an important engagement which meant business, therefore I took the little packet—which, I think, contained some jewellery—and left Paddington after an early dinner. The fog was very bad, but as I had been to Jules' little cottage at the entrance to Fulmer village on several previous occasions, and as I did not wish to attract undue attention by hiring a conveyance, I set out and walked from Gerrard's Cross Station. On arrival, however, at half-past nine o'clock I found that, though there was a light within the cottage, our friend was absent. I waited in the vicinity for a long time, and it being so foggy the curiosity of the villagers was not aroused. As you know, Jules was always careful. He did not keep a woman servant at that obscure little retreat of his. A young man attended to his wants during the day, and went home at four o'clock. Therefore in the evening he was always alone."

"You speak of Jules Bérard, I take it ?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," she replied. "Sometimes we call him Eugene, but what his real name was Mr. Almond will know."

"Charles Denham," exclaimed Jim. "He was born in France, and easily passed as a Frenchman."

"Well," continued the girl, as we all stood with open ears, "I waited and waited in vain, until it grew past eleven, and fearing that I should not catch my last train back to London, I started to walk back to Gerrard's Cross. When I had gone about a quarter of a mile from the village I encountered in the fog a woman who, from her dress, I believed to be Iris Almond, and, halting, addressed her as such. At first she made no reply, but as I was persistent, and grasped her by the arm, she was compelled to speak. Then, to my utter amazement, I recognised the voice and the face of Eugene !"

"Attired as a woman ?" exclaimed Jim Almond.

"Yes. In a big hat and long black coat, as described at the inquest by that poacher."

"Then it was Eugene who killed poor Paul !" cried Iris, as her hands clasped themselves convulsively. "I—I—never thought of that !"

"You were accused, dear Iris," replied the

girl in sympathy—"accused because of the story told by that eye-witness, Smith——"

"And also by a second witness—Mr. Eastlake, a retired barrister, of Old Hagley Manor, who was walking home, and who, on hearing voices, paused and saw the fatal embrace, just as Smith saw it," interrupted Miller.

"But I was not there," declared Iris quickly. "I left Paul after he had denounced dad as an adventurer, and returned towards the station. But in the fog I missed my way, and eventually caught the last train from Beaconsfield."

"I expressed surprise at finding Eugene in such a garb," Elsie went on, "and he appeared greatly flurried and upset. I told him of the packet I bore from Philip, therefore he invited me back again to the house to which he sometimes retired when Paris grew too hot for him. We walked together, and my curiosity became greatly aroused. Presently, however, he explained that the reason he had disguised himself was in order to watch two men whom he suspected to be detectives, who were making inquiries in the neighbourhood. He had lately disappeared from Paris, as you will remember."

"Well?" I asked, as she had paused.

"Well, as soon as he got inside he slipped off his jacket and skirt which he wore above his ordinary clothes and flung them upon the sofa. Then he opened the packet, and I saw it con-

tained a valuable diamond brooch which Philip had, no doubt, secured by illegitimate means, and wished to send to old Jacobsen in Utrecht. But while he was doing so I took up the jacket to examine it, when to the floor there fell from the pocket a tiny syringe, similar to those used for injections of morphia. He cried to me not to touch it, and picking it up very carefully himself, placed it at once upon the fire."

"And then?" asked Jim Almond.

"A quarter of an hour later, in his masculine clothes, he set out with me to catch the last train from Gerrard's Cross. On the way we passed the Duke's Wood, whereupon he asked me to promise to say nothing of how I had discovered him masquerading. This I promised to do, and returned to London. It was only when in the papers I read a report of the inquest, and I heard that Iris was accused, that I realised the truth. And then—well, I then turned my knowledge to my own advantage."

"How?" asked Almond.

"I accused him to his face, and I fixed my own price upon my secrecy," she said in a rather hard voice. "He confessed to me—he had to confess—that it was he who had 'wired' to Paul at 'Claridge's,' in Iris's name, making the appointment near Gerrard's Cross Station, and that he had also 'wired' to Iris at Newcastle Station in Paul's name appointing the meeting."

"Why?" I asked.

"With a double object," she replied. "Paul had discovered that Jules, who had been posing as the inventor of the new system of controlling the Hertzian waves, was a swindler, and he had denounced him. Further, Paul had found out that Jules had been paying undue attention to you, Iris, and in consequence, he had given him a sound thrashing. This had happened a week before in Paris. Jules, smarting under the indignity, had returned to England and taken up his old quarters with one object—revenge."

"But why did he desire to avenge himself upon Miss Almond?" I queried.

"Jules Bérard wished to have revenge upon us both," her father said. "I had only a few weeks before refused to be a party to a desperate plot formed by Pontifex and himself, to attack a bank at Lyons, where the life of the night-watchman must be sacrificed, if success was to be obtained. This had incensed him, and furthermore, he suspected Iris of being the cause of my refusal to allow the dastardly plot to be carried into effect. He believed that my daughter, tired of this mode of life, might confess to the police. I see through it all now!" he added, with a fierce imprecation. "The infernal black-guard foresaw that, by his ingenious plot, which he carried out single-handed, he could have his revenge upon the young Count for his pluck in

thrashing him, and at the same time throw the guilt upon my daughter in such a manner that she could not prove an *alibi*."

"But, Iris," I cried, "why were you silent if you were innocent?"

"What could I do? I had no idea of the identity of the assassin," she explained. "I knew that, with such deadly circumstantial evidence against me, any protest of mine must of necessity be futile. Ah!—my position—was horrible!"

"But why were Rushton and Pontifex so bitterly antagonistic towards you?" I inquired.

"They, together with my father, no doubt believed that I had killed poor Paul!" she said. "They never suspected Eugene. Cannot you see that they both anticipated that I, a woman, in my desperation of jealousy and revenge, might make confession, and reveal the truth regarding them. Hence they were anxious to see me safely lodged in gaol—for their own security. The instant I heard that Paul was dead," she added, "I knew that every effort would be made by the police to find me. That was why I took to flight."

"Ah!" sighed Almond, placing his hand tenderly upon her shoulder. "Heaven knows how I have suffered, dear—for I, your father, believed you guilty!"

"Listen," exclaimed Elsie Maxwell, moving

uneasily, and speaking in a low, strained voice, "I have still something further to tell you. When I fixed the price of my silence, Eugene paid me half the sum down. In order to shield him, I gave certain information to Inspector Miller regarding Iris, whom he suspected, and it was I who sent the anonymous letter from Brighton which gave information that 'Miss Bond,' governess at Charlwood, was identical with Iris Almond. I admit it was cruel and unjustifiable, and for it I humbly ask your pardon, Iris."

"That blackguard Eugene—I'll show him no mercy!" cried Almond, in fierce fury.

"Yes," remarked the girl. "He did not act straight even towards his friends. He held Iris, the girl whom he was seeking to convict of murder, in constant dread, declaring that if she ever got wind of the truth she would denounce the whole gang and their exploits, and more especially the ugly circumstances under which that old Hebrew diamond dealer, Goldstein, of Amsterdam, met his death a year ago in a house in the Marnix Street."

"He killed old Goldstein with a little hypodermic syringe filled with some deadly arrow poison, which he had obtained from a Belgian officer who had returned from the Congo," declared Almond. "He pressed in the needle in the back of the head, under the hair, where the

wound was not visible. I know that to be a fact."

"And in that selfsame manner the man Denham, alias Bérard, undoubtedly killed Paul Pauletti," declared Miller. "We have it in evidence that the woman, supposed to be your daughter, held him with her arms affectionately around his neck, and that almost immediately afterwards the unfortunate man collapsed. Besides, did not the little instrument fall from the jacket pocket when Miss Maxwell examined it?"

"That he was guilty is placed beyond doubt," Elsie said. "Yesterday morning I received by post this letter," and she held out a note to us on grey notepaper. "Haunted by his two foul crimes, he lived constantly under the impression that witnesses were rising up against him, and in a fit of mad despair he has thrown himself down the deep well in the garden of his cottage."

"Dead!" I cried. "And you, Iris, from you this terrible charge has now happily been lifted by the very woman whom they declared to be your deadliest rival!"

She burst into a flood of tears, and grasping hands, the pair wept together, while we men stood facing each other exchanging glances.

At last Miller broke the painful silence.

"Almond," he said, in a quiet, serious voice, "you know what my duty is as a police officer. Well, I—I'm going to neglect it—for once. I

can't bear to see a woman's tears. It is now eight o'clock," he added, with a glance at his watch. "I'm going out, and I shall not return until ten. Probably you will neither of you be here when I call again. If so, let me wish you adieu, and at the same time beg of Miss Iris to forgive me for suspecting her of killing Paul Pauletti."

We well understood the detective's meaning.

"Ah!" cried Iris. "You are indeed good and generous to my father, Mr. Miller. Of course I forgive you, and we both thank you for this leniency from the bottom of our hearts."

"Mr. Miller!" cried the handsome, grey-moustached old man. "From to-night you will not find Jim Almond participate in any further crooked bit of business. Here is my hand in promise."

Thief and detective clasped hands. Then the latter took his hat and went forth into the evening twilight.

And when he returned two hours later he found the cottage deserted.

Mr. James Jellicoe and his daughter—as they were known at Wilsford—had departed, never to return.

CONCLUSION

NEARLY a year has now passed. I saw Whatton at the bank at Winchester a week after the truth was revealed, and told him the real story of the death of his friend.

But the final lines of this curious record of the under-world of Society, I am writing beneath an ancient twisted olive, in a sloping garden, where, through the grey greenery, shows the placid bright blue Ionian sea. Away upon the horizon before me rises a long range of mountains growing purple in the fiery Eastern sunset, the mystic land of wild Albania, that country where life is still medieval.

In the small white villa with the green sun-shutters, on beautiful Corfu—the paradise of the Ionian Islands, and one of the few places on the face of the globe where there is no extradition treaty, and where consequently the foreign evildoer is immune from arrest—I am again the guest of Jim Almond and his pretty daughter, who, though Miller has given up the chase, are compelled to live there for the future, owing to the warrants still out for them.

Ralph Rushton, betrayed by his false friend

Pontifex, who quarrelled with him over the division of the proceeds of the Hildesheim robbery, is at this moment undergoing a long term of imprisonment in Germany, while Pontifex himself is believed to have been arrested and sentenced under another name in France, for nothing has been heard of him for many months—not, indeed, since a fortnight after that memorable evening at Wilsford, when the truth of Paul's death was revealed, and when Miller so generously allowed my perhaps rather undesirable friends, as he had termed them, two hours' respite.

The gang has been effectively broken up. The body of Charles Denham, alias Jules Bérand, was found in the well at Fulmer, and Iris's deadliest rival has now become her warmest friend. Jim Almond, lithe and active, has returned to Corsica to become a respectable member of the small English colony under his old name, James Jellicoe, while his sweet-faced daughter is declared to be a great acquisition to the small circle of those who speak English and drink tea in the afternoons, in that sun-blached little town where the Kaiser has his winter quarters.

I have already been their guest on three occasions at the Villa Lillah—as they have named their comfortable flower-embowered little home—and have many times crossed to Albania, and shot woodcock with my host.

It is said in Corfu, I believe, that Iris is to become my wife.

Well, to tell the truth, there are more unlikely things, for after my own restless cosmopolitan life, permanent residence amidst the peace and brilliance of this sunny Greek island—the nearest approach perhaps to terrestrial paradise—would be in no way unwelcome.

Often we walk beside the sea hand in hand and recall those troublous times now past. Yes—we love each other.

And sometimes we try to peer into the future and see what it may have in store. But, alas! it is a sealed book to us—as to you.

“Shall you marry her?” you inquire.

To this I may perhaps confess that I have asked Iris to become my wife.

Yesterday—only yesterday—ah! never-to-be-forgotten day—she consented! Therefore am I filled with a great and boundless joy, for I have to-day spoken to her father; and thus have I brought my strangely romantic wooing to

THE END.